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ISSN 1750-8061
2.1

Journal of Chinese Cinemas

Volume Two Number One

intellect journals | Film Studies

Journal of Chinese Cinemas

Volume 2 Number 1 2008

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ISSN 1750–8061

Printed and bound in Great Britain by 4edge, UK.

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Journal of Chinese Cinemas Volume 2 Number 1 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Editorial. English language. doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.3/2

Introduction, or, What's in an 's'?

Chris Berry *Goldsmiths, University of London*
Laikwan Pang *Chinese University of Hong Kong*

This special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* aims to encourage further interrogation of the 'transnational' in 'transnational Chinese cinemas' by publishing essays that do just that. Each of the five essays shines a light on five different paths for further thinking about the 'transnational' in 'transnational Chinese cinemas': as a method; as a history; in terms of its relationship to the national; as a space where cinema meets other media and as a cultural geography.

It is a decade now since Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu published his anthology, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (1997). With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that this was a watershed moment in the study of Chinese cinemas. In fact, the very terms 'Chinese cinemas' (in the plural) and 'transnational Chinese cinemas' were rarely used before Lu's book. Now they name the field that we study and are used routinely. 'Chinese cinemas' takes for granted the transborder production, distribution and exhibition of Chinese films.

As a conceptual framework, 'transnational Chinese cinemas' certainly corresponds to empirical reality better than the old territorially-bounded fantasy of a monolithic 'national cinema'. So, why do we feel a need to interrogate its 'routine' use and taken-for-grantedness? By way of explanation, let us tell you our story of an 's'. When we first wrote the proposal for this special issue and sent it in to the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, we called it 'What is transnational Chinese cinema?' The editor of the journal, Song Hwee Lim, accepted the proposal, but asked us to change the title to 'What are transnational Chinese cinemas?' We were happy to comply, but why did we not add the 's' in the first place? And why did Lim want us to add it? The immediate answer is obvious; the title of the journal is also in the plural – *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. However, beyond this 's' lie the many senses of the 'transnational'.

In the editorial to the first issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, Lim explored the example of Tsai Ming-liang and his complex background, encompassing Malaysia and Taiwan and interests outside the mainstream. He wrote that Tsai 'problematizes any monolithic concept of *a* Chinese national cinema and embodies a complexity and diversity that demands an equally sophisticated and plural approach to his films, and, by extension, to the field of Chinese cinemas studies' (Lim 2007: 3). In other words, Lim's insistence on the 's' is in recognition of the multiple and transnational quality of Chinese cinemas.

We agree that Chinese film-making is plural and that the old idea of *a* monolithic national cinema must be rejected. So, why was our initial instinct to drop the 's'? Lim correctly points out that, 'the plural form of

Chinese cinemas is usually deployed along national lines to distinguish film-making practices among mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora' (Lim 2007: 3). (He also points out that this is not the only reason for pluralization – the variety of modes, genres, interests and types of screen culture all mitigate against any monolithic quality in Chinese film-making and provide good reasons for the plural.) Our initial use of the singular was not to invoke that old idea of a monolithic national cinema. Rather, we were recognizing that the transnationalization of Chinese film-making practices has in fact weakened the separation between Chinese cinemas that Lim points to as a primary reason for the use of the plural. In other words, with 'Chinese cinemas' and 'Chinese cinema' Lim and we both want to invoke the 'transnational', albeit in different senses.

Transnationalization has promoted links that make it harder to distinguish a Hong Kong film from a Chinese film or a Taiwan film. As the Taiwan feature film industry has dwindled, many Taiwan film-makers have dispersed, seeking jobs elsewhere. For example, Hsu Hsiaoming, the director of *Heartbreak Island* (*Qunian Dongtian*, 1995) and producer of *Blue Gate Crossing* (*Lanse Damen*, 2002), now has his offices in Beijing, located in a courtyard he shares with documentary producers, also from Taiwan originally. Another younger generation of Taiwan directors is aiming to make genre films that do not have Taiwan-specific appeal, but can reach young Chinese audiences wherever they might be. Robin Lee (Lee Yun-chan) made her directing debut with *The Shoe Fairy* (*Renyu Duoduo*, 2005) in the First Focus series executive-produced by Daniel Yu Wai-kwok of Hong Kong. Although her second film was produced in Taiwan by Three Dots Entertainment, the narrative of *My DNA Says I Love You* (*Jiyin Jueding Wo Ai Ni*, 2007) leaves Taiwan completely for a generic modern Chinese city (the film was actually shot in Xiamen).

As Hong Kong films have lost their Southeast Asian market to pirate DVDs and Korean films, so they have turned more and more to the mainland. This has not only meant targeting mainland audiences, but increasingly it also means turning to the mainland for sources of finance, scripts, actors and more. Under the Common Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), since 2004 Hong Kong films with a sufficient degree of mainland participation are treated as mainland films by the authorities in Beijing. This means that these films are not limited by the quotas on the import of 'foreign films' into the mainland of the People's Republic and have free access to the mainland market. Furthermore, it also means that the same films are getting counted as 'local' in both places, leading to overlapping statistics.

This blurring of Hong Kong and mainland film-making also has other consequences. First, as this status is economically significant for film-makers in Hong Kong, they are increasingly making films with the mainland in mind. Take Ann Hui as an example. Her recent productions, *Jade Goddess of Mercy* (*Yu Guanyin*, 2005) and *Postmodern Adventures of My Aunt* (*Yima de Houxiandai Shenghuo*, 2007) have mainland settings and stars – Kunming and Vicky Zhao alongside Hong Kong's Nicholas Tse in the former case, and Shanghai and Siqin Gaowa alongside Hong Kong's Chow Yun-fat in the latter. 'Making films with the mainland in mind' also means thinking about the censorship standards that prevail in a country that, unlike Hong

Kong, still does not have a classification system, and also operates with more political censorship than in Hong Kong.

The thorough exploration of these structural shifts in Chinese film-making would require more space than we have in this short introduction. But for our purposes here, this outline is sufficient. It makes clear that where Lim adds the 's' to counter any monolithic understanding of Chinese cinema, we removed it to recognize the increasing move away from that monolithic model, but in the form of transnational linkages, as outlined above. Certainly, Chinese film-making remains internally distinguished and multiple, but this may be manifested less in territorial separation than in different modes of film-making and different sectors of film culture. At the same time, flows of personnel and money between these modes and sectors suggest, if not anything as fixed and integrated as a system, at least a *combinatoire* of linked operations. From our story of the 's', it is clear not only that the 'transnational' means different things in different places and times, but that there is not necessarily a single correct use of the term.

This difficulty in pinning down the 'transnational' is one factor leading Zhang Yingjin to prefer 'comparative film studies'. He writes:

> The term 'transnational' remains unsettled primarily because of multiple interpretations of the national in transnationalism. What is emphasized in the term 'transnational'? If it is the national, then what does this 'national' encompass – national culture, language, economy, politics, ethnicity, religion, and/or regionalism? If the emphasis falls on the prefix 'trans' (i.e. on cinema's ability to cross and bring together, if not transcend, different nations, cultures, and languages), then this aspect of transnational film studies is already subsumed by comparative film studies.
>
> (Zhang, 2007: 37)

Comparison refers to the existence and separation of distinct entities, but we believe that the relationships among various Chinese film-making communities are mutually penetrating, their borders porous and constantly changing. We understand the frustration of the slippery quality of the 'transnational'. But rather than try to close down its protean quality or move away from it, we have selected essays that pursue it in different directions and push its limits.

Yiman Wang starts the issue with an examination of the Chinese remakes (in Shanghai and Hong Kong) of Lubitsch's *The Love Parade*, and also the Cantonese opera versions of the narrative. There is no question that there are plenty of transborder flows and transcultural appropriations here – from Europe to Hollywood; from Hollywood to Shanghai; from Shanghai to Hong Kong and more. However, Wang's reflection on these transnational objects of study opens up a whole other set of questions. She asks not what transnational Chinese films are as objects, but rather what transnational Chinese film studies is as a method.

Here, Wang engages in larger debates about the politics and ethics of the transnational and about globalization in general. Are the transnational and globalization simply other words for globalism – the ideology and practice of neo-liberal economics, and the drive to produce difference as only wage differentials and consumer choices within an otherwise

homogenous system of corporate capitalism and corporate-sponsored democracy? Wang seeks to mobilize the transnational in a different direction, one that resists simple commodifiability of transnational objects or cultural nationalist celebration of transnational export.

In Zhang's terms, Wang's essay emphasizes the 'national' in the transnational. From her point of view, all the borders – administrative, cultural, theoretical, political and more – in the transnational can enable productive differences and disjunctures. These range from the transformation of local culture enabled by foreign imports thematized in the various Chinese localizations of *The Love Parade*, to the critical insights produced by views across the borders of culture and academic disciplines.

Wang cites Lu's comment that 'Chinese film was an event of transnational capital from its beginning' (1997: 4). The historical dimension of Chinese transnational cinemas is at the centre not only of her essay, but also of Kenny Ng's. Ng's essay is a detailed empirical account of censorship of films brought in from outside the territory of Hong Kong between 1950 and 1970. Chinese cinemas may have been transnational from the beginning, as Lu claims. But what Ng's history reveals is that the transnational has a history, and history means change.

Hong Kong might be known as a 'free port', but Ng's essay reveals the constructed and often constrained quality of this 'freedom'. The records that he has accessed and researched reveal the high level of anxiety felt by Hong Kong's rulers during the height of the Cold War and the tensions provoked by the Cultural Revolution just across the border. 'Freedom' might mean freedom from import and export taxes, but it does not necessarily mean freedom for Hong Kong people to view whatever they like. In fact, Ng's research shows that contrary to many assumptions about Hong Kong, the import and exhibition of films in Hong Kong was strongly if discreetly controlled by the government. Ng's analysis of film imports under colonialism reminds us that transnational flow, contrary to the metaphor the word invokes, is not a spontaneous force of nature, but shaped and produced by various social, economic and cultural forces. Understanding those different flows and how they relate to different kinds of socio-economic and political regimes – the Communist, the American-aligned, the colonial and more – is another important aspect of the transnational requiring further attention.

The question of how different political regimes participate in and shape the transnational also drives Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis's essay on the China Film Group Corporation in Beijing. This huge government-owned conglomerate retains a monopoly on the highly profitable box-office split imports that the Chinese government has allowed since the mid-1990s. It has long been the major player in the distribution and exhibition sector. The revenue it derives from these activities has allowed it also to become a major player in the production of the globally successful Chinese martial arts blockbusters so readily associated with transnational Chinese cinemas at the moment. If the market sector struggled to develop against the instincts of the socialist state in the early days, the two work closely together today in a process of mutual strengthening exemplified by the China Film Group.

Yeh and Davis's essay not only reverses old assumptions about the relationship between the market and the state. It also builds on these observations to reverse the usual assumptions about the relationship between the transnational and the national. Many commentators assume that more participation in the transnational means weakening of the nation-state. On the basis of the China Film Group's activities, Yeh and Davis see participation in the transnational as a strategy to strengthen the Chinese nation-state that tends towards the renationalization of the Chinese film industry. In other words, Yeh and Davis may also eventually want to drop the 's' in 'transnational Chinese cinema', too, but for reasons rather different from those we have observed at the beginning of this essay.

When we hear the term 'transnational Chinese cinemas', most of us think first about the blockbusters like *Curse of the Golden Flowers* (*Mancheng Jindai Huangjin Jia*, 2006) and *The Banquet* (*Yeyan*, 2006) that feature strongly in Yeh and Davis's essay. The final two essays in the anthology, by Rossella Ferrari and Zakir Hossein Raju respectively, focus on the artistic and geographical outer limits of transnational Chinese cinemas. In the first case, the transnational is linked to the transmedial to stretch the boundaries of what counts as cinema, whereas in the second case the territory of Greater China is left behind entirely to ask whether the Chinese cinema of Malaysia can be simultaneously of a single nation-state and part of transnational Chinese cinemas.

Ferrari examines the multimedia performances organized through Hong Kong's Zuni Icosahedron art collective. The events were organized on either side of the 1997 Handover, and involved artists from Taiwan and the mainland, as well as Hong Kong. Some of these were well-known film-makers, such as Wu Wenguang, Stanley Kwan (Guan Jinpeng) and Edward Yang (Yang Dechang). She examines how the transmedial zone of multimedia appropriations becomes in these works a zone for the figuration and exploration of Chinese transnationality in all its complexity at this crucial juncture. For example, she notes how, in a time of (dis)appearance and efforts to lay down traces, various works play on the contrast between the impermanent presence of live performance versus the ghostly permanence of the film or video performance. In this way, she interrogates the limits of what we should consider as the 'cinema' in 'transnational Chinese cinemas'.

Raju's essay also takes in a wide definition of 'cinema', because the films he looks at are almost all shot on digital video. The Malaysian digital video cinema movement is one of the most vibrant and original to appear in recent years. With one or two exceptions, the main film-makers are all Chinese Malaysians and the films they make are set in Chinese Malaysian worlds with no Malay or Indian characters of significance. In a sense, this is a Chinese cinema made in the diaspora. Raju asks how this phenomenon should be understood in relation to transnationality, for although this cinema is part of diaspora culture, it is also entirely produced within the single nation-state territory of Malaysia. To answer these questions of cultural geography, he places the films not only in the framework of 'transnational Chinese cinemas', but also in the framework of what he calls '*Mahua*' or 'Malaysian overseas Chinese' cultural production.

In conclusion, these five very different essays have five very different approaches to the 'transnational' in 'transnational Chinese cinemas'. While we are opposed to taking the 'transnational' for granted, we do not approach the 'transnational' as a theoretical concept for which only one precise definition is acceptable. Instead, by understanding the term as multi-functional, we hope that the rich and complex possibilities of the seemingly simple and obvious 'transnational' can begin to crystallize and proliferate. In this way, we also hope this issue will stimulate further consideration of 'transnational Chinese cinemas' – or 'cinema', whichever is most appropriate!

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Suggested citation

Berry, C. and Pang, L. (2008), 'Introduction, or, What's in an 's'?', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2: 1, pp. 3–8, doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.3/2

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Journal of Chinese Cinemas Volume 2 Number 1 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.9/1

The 'transnational' as methodology: transnationalizing Chinese film studies through the example of *The Love Parade* and its Chinese remakes

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Abstract

This essay critiques unreflective celebration of transnational Chinese cinema and proposes the 'transnational' as methodology. By examining the dual modes of address in a Hong Kong remake of a Lubitsch musical comedy, I demonstrate the importance of scrutinizing border politics and the 'foreignization' of Chinese cinema in its transnational production and reception.

Keywords

transnational cinema
methodology
mode of address
foreignization
remake

I. The euphoria of the transnational

There is a risk in chanting 'transnational' cinema, just as there is a risk in celebrating 'hybridity'. While the transnational discourse has proliferated over the past decade into what is virtually an academic mantra, the critical parameters of the transnational are often left unquestioned and unexplored. Consequently, the discourse elides the 'disjuncture' that Arjun Appadurai emphasizes in his analysis of the transnational scapes, including the ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, finanscape and ideoscape (Appadurai 1994). In Chinese film studies, this critical lapse has been aggravated since the 1990s by exponentially increasing transnational cinema activities in the form of outsourcing, co-production, simultaneous global exhibition and borderless movie download websites. Indeed, at one hundred-plus years old, Chinese cinema has never been more transnational than now, in the commonly recognized era of globalization that heavily relies upon goods 'made in China' – including films. As Chinese cinema is now revealed to be a site traversed by various internal and external forces, we feel the prevalent euphoria over the broadened horizon, the relaxed border lines and the newly discovered territories.

Nevertheless, instead of summarily disposing of the issue of the border, such euphoric transnational discourse often finds itself encountering questions. Does a border still exist in the de-territorialized transnational domain, a border across which 'Chinese' status becomes annulled? What are the stakes in maintaining or transcending the border? How may we redefine the border so as to productively re-territorialize de-bordered Chinese cinema?

Given the geopolitical 'border', its attendant apparatuses, and the politics that keep on haunting the various vectors of transnational flow,

to uncritically emphasize the transnational risks reproducing and buying into Hollywood hegemony. After all, Hollywood is the first successful border-crossing model in production and distribution. Once we place border politics back into the euphoric picture, we realize that the fundamental challenge is *not* to collect more transnational Chinese films, but rather to interrogate the very concept of 'transnational Chinese cinema'. We need to ask what problems it glosses over, and how we can re-tool this concept in order to address the cultural politics in Chinese film production, distribution and exhibition, especially the cultural politics that has produced what Appadurai describes as 'an altogether new condition of neighborliness', or media-induced 'communities with "no sense of place"' that are 'rhizomic, even schizophrenic' on the one hand, and imbued with 'fantasies (or nightmares) or electronic propinquity on the other' (Appadurai 1994: 325).

These questions have led to some thought-provoking works. In her study of cross-Pacific Sinophone articulations, Shu-mei Shih critiques the abstract understanding of heterogeneity for being easily universalizable and containable by 'a benign logic of global multiculturalism' (2007: 7). In the field of film studies, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden propose to use transnational cinema as 'a critical category' (rather than just to refer to a body of works) in order to 'factor Europe and the US into the problematics of "world cinema"', allowing us to 'recognize the hybridity of much new Hollywood cinema' (2006: 2). With regard to Chinese film studies, Sheldon Lu's observation that 'Chinese film was an event of transnational capital from its beginning' has triggered intense interest in the transnational dimension of Chinese cinema (1997: 4). A decade later, Yingjin Zhang reflects upon the proliferating works on Chinese cinema, and argues for 'comparative cinema' in place of 'transnational cinema', since the former indicates a broader field that 'better captures the multiple directionality with which film studies simultaneously looks outwards (transnationalism, globalization), inwards (cultural traditions and aesthetic conventions), backwards (history and memory), and sideways (cross-medial practices and interdisciplinary research)' (2007: 29–30, 37).

Unlike Zhang, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar focus on ways of re-energizing the transnational for Chinese film studies. For them, the transnational is important 'not as a higher order, but as a larger arena *connecting differences*, so that a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest' (2006: 5, added emphasis). They encourage 'transnational scholarly exchange and discussion' that will also benefit other national cinemas, including those of the West (2006: 15). In this transnational environment, they argue, the researcher's own positioning comes under scrutiny and becomes part and parcel of transnational Chinese film studies per se.

My essay partakes in the critical reconsideration of border politics in transnational Chinese cinema by suggesting a perspectival shift. Instead of accumulating samples of transnational Chinese films and viewing the transnational as a commodifiable *phenomenon*, I mobilize the transnational as a *methodology*, a new way of approaching Chinese film studies that can be extended to film studies in general. This approach will enhance the analytical power of the concept and open up a new framework for treating

Chinese cinema as one link in the larger constellation of social-political as well as filmic negotiations. To this end, I focus on 'trans' as a process of transit characterized by constant incommensurability and incongruity. To fully understand the complicated process of transit, I mobilize the 'foreign' perspective to problematize the presumably all-incorporating Self (or Chinese cinema in this case). I aim to demonstrate that the border does not evaporate, but becomes redefined. It is no longer out there to be crossed and bridged, but rather interiorized as a self-demarcating and self-monitoring system that remains important even if crossed, and that is (re)activated at every step of negotiation between what is perceived as the local Self and what is perceived as the foreign Other.

Walter Mignolo's concept of 'border thinking' is instructive here. Based on 'languaging and bilanguaging', border thinking emphasizes colonial difference and reveals coloniality as the darker side of modernity (2000: 253). In my context, border thinking urges us to consider the transnational methodology and border politics that are obscured by the transnational phenomenon understood as *fait accompli*. To extend Mignolo's argument, I suggest that productive border thinking can be conducted not only from the side of the colonized Self, which leads to new subaltern epistemology, but also from the side of the colonial foreign, which captures the moment of encounter before it sediments and becomes domesticated (in our theoretical schema at least) into a taken-for-granted format of hybridity and transnationality. This refocus foregrounds the complex operations of bilanguaging and transculturation from the foreign side of the border.

To explicate the transnational as methodology and the ways in which this methodology may activate the foreign side of the border and enable us to focus on border politics in the process of 'trans', I turn to a case of border-crossing film remaking. I analyze Ernst Lubitsch's first talkie, *The Love Parade* (1929) and its adaptations into two plays and one film in 1930s Shanghai, entitled *Xuangong yanshi* (the two plays) and *Xueguo nühuang* (*Queen of the Snow Country*) (dir. Xue Juexian 1934, film), which were then reprised as a 1957 Hong Kong film, *Xuangong yanshi* (*My Kingdom for a Husband*) (dir. Zuo Ji). The Cantonese song numbers in the film came to constitute a key component in Cantonese opera repertoire up until the 1970s.

In the analysis below, I focus on the dual modes of address (audiovisual and thematic) deployed in the 1957 Hong Kong remake of Lubitsch's *The Love Parade*. The mode of address, according to Paul Willemen, defines a film's national status. Willemen writes, 'The issue of national cinema is…primarily a question of address, rather than a matter of filmmaker's citizenship or even of the production finance's country of origin' and '[f]rom a historical critical perspective, the fundamental question to ask of a film is: in which direction does this particular bundle of discourse seek to *move* its viewers or readers?' (2006: 12, 14, added emphasis). By analyzing a film's modes of addressing the audience, we not only place it in its historical and geopolitical context, but also underscore its interactions with multifarious audience groups. Thus, we hope to establish a circuit of address and reception in relation to specific border politics.

In the pages below, I examine how divergent modes of address of the 1957 Hong Kong remake arise from the 'foreign' perspective inscribed in

the film's form and narrative. I then consider how we may design a transnational mode of knowledge production that emphasizes foreignness, incongruity and inequity, or what Berry and Farquhar describe as 'the connection of difference' (2006: 15), rather than unproblematic synergy and assimilation.

II. The 'foreign' perspective and the dual modes of address

It has been well documented that Lubitsch, the German émigré director in Hollywood, exerted significant influence on early twentieth century Chinese cinema. He presented an important model for late 1920s to early-mid 1930s Chinese directors, who were mostly self-educated through repetitive movie-viewing and note-taking.[1] To the Chinese gaze, Lubitsch's combination of European flair and Hollywood capitalism conveyed two opposing messages. On the one hand, Lubitsch's style was viewed as a problematic manifestation of capitalist materialism. Contrasting the capitalist American cinema with the socialist Soviet cinema, a critic described *The Love Parade* as spiritual opium derived from the second phase of capitalism. 'Who would want revolution after watching a film like this?' (Xiang 1932: n. p.) This critic goes on to posit two options for Chinese cinema: becoming a second Hollywood (i.e. doom) or developing a film for the people (i.e. hope).

Other Chinese reviewers, however, appreciated Lubitsch's European flair, interpreted as indulgence in stylistic opulence and moral lapse. For them, Lubitsch's European flair enabled a film like *So This Is Paris* (1926) – considered superior – which unapologetically depicts Parisian men and women's unrestrained lifestyle, contrary to *We Moderns* (dir. John Francis Dillon 1925), which pedantically condemns the modern girl and delivers an inept moral message. Lubitsch demonstrates 'how useless the paper crown of morality is' (Wei 1928: 10 – 11)!

The contention between the two positions lasted for over a decade. However, they did share an implicit concern with the direction of Chinese cinema. To that extent, the Chinese reception of Lubitsch was inherently comparative. Lubitsch was not seen in isolation, but rather as a filmic Other vis-à-vis Chinese cinema, for which it provided a positive or a negative model. This comparative gaze was paradigmatic of Chinese cinema's continuous negotiation with Western cinema. To that extent, the formation of Chinese cinema is predicated upon border-crossing reception of foreign cinemas. In other words, Lubitsch's cinema is not an irrelevant foreign Other, but rather an Other that is constituted *and* constitutive of the Self. Likewise, Chinese cinema is never a self-sufficient Self, but always already a foreignized Self.

How then does the foreignization process take place exactly? First, as discussed previously, Lubitsch's Hollywood productions were seen as doubly foreign and exotic – European as well as American. *The Love Parade*, Lubitsch's first talkie, was adapted from a French play, *The Prince Consort*, and dramatizes a romantic comedy staged in the palace of a queen-led country named Sylvania. To reinforce the fantasia, and also to showcase Paramount's new sound-recording technology, the leading couple (played by Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier) and their lower-class foil – her maid and his servant – constantly resort to singing (and dancing for

1. Lubitsch's indirect figuration of the romantic relationship in *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), for instance, was transposed into some mid-1930s melodramas.

the lower-class couple) as a means of expression and communication. Given Hollywood's avalanche into the Chinese market since World War I, neither comedies nor musicals were new to the Chinese audience. What made *The Love Parade* unique was its amalgamation of multiple attractions that liberated the film from realism and moralization. These attractions include physical comedy (especially as demonstrated by the servant couple), far-fetched romance, temporary yet carnivalesque reversal of the patriarchal order, spontaneous singing and dancing, *and* the prevalent exotic *mise-en-scène* suggestive of European palace fantasia.

Importantly, these attractions are enhanced by a foreign perspective that operates both diegetically and extra-diegetically. Diegetically, the narrative is set in stereotypically dandy-filled Paris and the fantastic country of Sylvania. Furthermore, the dandy-boy and future Prince Consort is a recently repatriated Sylvanian military attaché, who speaks better French than his supposedly native tongue of English. Indeed, his French allows him a foreign status with humorous effects.[2] On the extra-diegetic level, Maurice Chevalier who plays the Prince Consort, Alfred, hailed from France. His French accent and cabaret singing stylistically set off the Broadway singing and American accent of the Queen, played by Jeanette MacDonald. Chevalier's foreign position was doubled by Lubitsch himself as a German émigré in Hollywood, manifesting the larger phenomenon of the European influx into Hollywood. The diegetic and extra-diegetic domains intersect at the foreign perspective. Chevalier's alien-ness effectively fuelled the diegetic incongruity between the two protagonists, which was then inflected in the relationship between MacDonald and Lubitsch, and the more general dynamic described by James Harvey as one between a 'European rake' and a 'nice American girl' (1998: 17).

The built-in foreign perspective as a framing device produces two interconnected effects. The first reinforces the fantasia while literally as well as metaphorically evoking the theatrical setting. This leads to the second effect – creating the frame-within-a-frame structure and irony. The title, 'The Love Parade' underscores precisely the 'parade' nature of love – a rigidly coded fanfare staged for the audience, foreign as well as domestic, and extra-diegetic as well as diegetic. Such ironic distance is dramatized in two key sequences. One is the Queen's banquet with her would-be Prince Consort, which unfolds under the gaze of the court ladies and ministers whose emotional ventriloquization of the leading couple hyperbolically aligns their courtship with clichéd courting protocols. The second is the opera sequence, in which the Queen hopes to display a harmonious royal family image to foreign diplomats only to be tamed by her Consort who strategically harnesses the public gaze for reinstating patriarchy.[3]

Lubitsch's fantastic, romantic, musical comedy intrigued Xue Juexian (1903–1956) and Ma Shizeng (1901–1964), the two rival Cantonese opera stars, who quickly produced two Cantonese opera adaptations in 1930 with the same title, *Xuangong yanshi* (literally meaning 'An Amorous Episode in the Jade Palace').[4] A year later, a music record was released. To take advantage of the wide popularity of these Western-looking Cantonese operas (also known as *Xizhuang ju*, or 'Western costume opera'), the Shanghai film studio, Tianyi (Unique Film Studio, the predecessor of Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers), rapidly mobilized its recently acquired sound

2. Frustrated with his listless married life, and irate with the servants who refuse to serve breakfast without the Queen, the Prince Consort vents his indignation in French and gets away with it, leaving the servants befuddled.

3. I provide a more detailed analysis of these ironic frame-within-a-frame sequences staged for the public or foreign gaze in a paper entitled 'The love parade goes on: adapting Ernst Lubitsch in postwar Hong Kong', presented at the annual conference of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) 19–22 April 2007, Puebla, Mexico.

4. This Chinese title foregrounds the palace setting and the exotic romance, implying the exoticizing gaze on the Chinese part.

technology and contracted Xue Juexian to adapt his opera version into a Cantonese film, entitled *Xueguo huanghou* (*Queen of the Snow Country*, 1934). In 1957, *Xuangong yanshi* was remade in Hong Kong by Motion Pictures & General Investment (or MP & GI, the predecessor of Cathay),[5] which soon spawned an Eastman colour sequel in 1958. In the 1970s, the Hong Kong record industry released a new version of the song numbers performed by new Cantonese opera artists.[6]

The Love Parade was not the only Hollywood film adapted into 'Western costume' Cantonese operas and films. Other Hollywood films adapted and remade in the same trend include *The Grand Duchess and the Waiter* (dir. Malcolm St. Clair, 1926), which was adapted as *Baijin long* (*The Platinum Dragon*, play 1930, film 1933) starring Xue Juexian, and *The Thief of Baghdad*, which was adapted as *Zei wangzi* (*The Vagabond Prince*, play early 1920s or early 1930s, film 1939 and 1958) starring Ma Shizeng. Extending until the middle of the century, this trend was noted for combining apparently incongruent components – Western *mise-en-scène*, exotic narrative performed by a Cantonese cast, and Cantonese singing accompanied by eclectic musical instruments, including the Western violin, electric guitar, banjo, saxophone, as well as the northern and southern Chinese lute, drum, and zither.[7] The malleability and foreignization of Cantonese opera were closely related to the inception of talkie-era in the late 1920s. In his 1931 campaign to reform Cantonese opera, Ma Shizeng observes, 'As opera artists, we must not stick to the old conventions. Otherwise, we are doomed to fail in the heated competition between cinema and theater' (1932a: n. p.).[8] Ma does emphasize that as a patriot, one should preserve indigenous moral culture and that Western (or for that matter, northern Chinese) techniques could work only if properly domesticated (1932b: n. p.). However, the actual 'Western costume Cantonese operas' and their film adaptations do not necessarily follow the doctrine of domestication. Instead, I argue that they tend to demonstrate dual modes of address, both hinging upon foreignization, one being Westernization and integration, the other being exoticization and defamiliarization. The dual modes of address correlate to the composition and location of the targeted audience.

The fact that the 1934 film remake, *Queen of the Snow Country*, was shot in Cantonese in Shanghai (where Shanghai dialect is used) illustrates the importance of two elements – the audience and the foreign. The direct reason that the film was made in Shanghai was that although the main stars Xue Juexian and his wife Tang Xueqing both hailed from Guangzhou (Canton), they relocated to Shanghai in 1932 and launched their Nanfang (South China) Film Studio. The huge success of their opera led the Shanghai-based Unique Film Studio to finance Xue to adapt the play into a Cantonese talkie. Not only were the idea and cast drawn from the 'Western costume Cantonese drama'. More importantly, the targeted audience base was mainly in southern China and Southeast Asia where Cantonese speakers constituted the main overseas Chinese population. Thus, the production and exhibition of the film were displaced and disconnected from their immediate context and connected with communities that existed elsewhere, including in non-Chinese regions and countries. This 'long distance' film circuit therefore consisted of two processes – reception of Hollywood

5. This company was founded in 1956 by Loke Wan-tho (Lu Yuntao), a business tycoon from a Malaysian-Singaporean Chinese family.

6. For a historical account of the Shanghai and Hong Kong genealogy initiated by *The Love Parade*, see Yung Sai-shing in *The Cathay Story* (*Guotai gushi*).

7. According to Mai Xiaoxia, a film director and publicity director of Xue Juexian's theatre troupe, the early twentieth century Cantonese opera used forty instruments; and Western instruments were used only in Cantonese opera (not other regional Chinese operas). See Mai (1941: 813–814).

8. This is included in a book Ma compiled to propagate Cantonese opera to overseas Chinese during his 1931 trip to San Francisco.

(and other Western) cinema on the one hand, and addressing a widely disseminated, non-local dialect-culture audience on the other. This film culture that emerged from gazing *at* one foreign (Hollywood) Other and self-gazing *from* another foreign (Southeast Asian) perspective continued to characterize the 1957 remake of *Xuangong yanshi* (*My Kingdom for a Husband*), made in Hong Kong.

Given the widely disseminated audience, both within China and outside, whose linkage with Chinese heritage was at once undeniable and divergent, the 'Western costume' films as well as operas unsurprisingly mobilized dual modes of address that simultaneously emphasized connections with and disconnections from the Cantonese cultural matrix. My analysis below demonstrates how the 1957 remake addresses audiences differently through different strategies of deploying the 'foreign', thereby offering new angles for considering transnational Chinese cinema.

Like *The Love Parade*, the Hong Kong remake, *My Kingdom for a Husband*, inscribes a foreign perspective embodied by the Prince Consort, Ali, a musician from the Snow Country,[9] sojourning in the country of Champs at the opening of the film. Like Alfred in *The Love Parade*, Ali's foreign experience makes him an internal 'foreigner' or a foreignized countryman in Snow Country who constantly refers to Champs as a positive Other. Ali points out three differences between Champs and Snow Country. During the night banquet sequence in the jade palace where the romance begins, Ali questions the court hierarchy in his homeland by describing his sojourning land where the king and subjects communicate harmoniously, and the subjects can sit down to wine and dine with the king. This depiction immediately convinces the Snow Queen to invite him (a subject) to sit down for a mutual toast.

Ali's second intervention has to do with gender relationships. Countering the Queen's accusation of his womanizing and debauchery, he explains, 'In Champs, men and women are free to socialize with each other. It is considered normal rather than demoralized.' This foreign perspective allows Ali to not only restore his reputation, but also redefine himself as open-minded 'teacher' of the Queen. After all, unlike *The Love Parade* that opens with Alfred unapologetically flirting with a married woman, Ali is shown rejecting his seducers. His musician status further clinches his cultural capital as a polished and politically advanced cultural hero.

Following the trajectory of 'taming the queen', Ali's third attempt to undermine social hierarchy focuses on class difference when he and the Queen disagree on whether to attend their servants' wedding.[10] Whereas the Queen dogmatically states that the royal family must not associate with ordinary subjects, Ali insists that they should honour their friends' invitation. The Queen's ultimate education consists in her stepping off the throne, out of the luxurious palace, and into her subjects' lives. When she appears at the servants' wedding party in an attempt to retrieve Ali, she is understood to be actively connecting with her subjects. The film ends with a double honeymoon, the royal and the ordinary couples sharing the same vehicle.

Ali's 'foreign' perspective is mobilized to articulate rudimentary democracy transplanted from Champs. The Hong Kong remake thus ends with a certain (albeit simplistic) understanding of modern statecraft.

9. The Snow Country was translated as Non-Such in the English synopsis used in the film's publicity when it screened at the World Theatre in San Francisco.

10. Ali has played a crucial role in enabling the servants' wedding by encouraging the Queen's maid to leave the palace and pursue her love.

The message of political reform seems improbable in the overall fantastic setting inherited from *The Love Parade*. Nevertheless, the incongruity makes the political message ambivalent, rather than invalid. On the one hand, the overly optimistic ending reinforces the fantastic setting as if the reform could be easily conjured as another foreign (Western) fashion just like the costuming and *mise-en-scène*. On the other hand, the implantation of a political message can be understood in relation to Hong Kong's political position in the postwar world system. In his study of the film's director Zuo Ji, Hong Kong film critic Lee Cheuk-to describes Zuo as a 'metteur-en-scene' who specialized in didactic, formulaic family drama, but was incapable of serious social engagement (1996: 59-60). Lee's comments usefully underscore Zuo's predilection for the theatrical format that is radically different from the mode of realism, but he fails to recognize Zuo's ability to reinvent and foreignize the formula. *My Kingdom for a Husband* demonstrates two aspects of reinvention. The first is thematic, implicating Hong Kong's self-positioning vis-à-vis mainland China and the West in the Cold War world system. The second is formal, emphasizing incongruence between the regional and the foreign. These two aspects address the audience in different modes.

On the thematic level, Ali sets up an educational scenario by placing Snow Country and Champs in a conservative–advanced binary. The desire for modern political democracy, articulated in Ali's straight-faced didactic rhetoric (in sharp contrast to Alfred's dandyish and farcical reversal of the Queen's order) suggests an earnest social commentary. This social commentary implicitly parallels Hong Kong's modernization drive at the turn of the 1960s. To contextualize this political message, we may argue that by deploying Ali as the 'internal foreigner' between Snow Country and Champs, the film allegorically situates Hong Kong as the intermediary between China and the West. Just as Ali articulates a democratic future for Snow Country, Hong Kong aspires to and emulates Western modernity on the one hand, and contrasts itself with conservative and provincial mainland China on the other. Both Ali and Hong Kong serve as linchpins constituting a comparative and cross-referential frame, which facilitates compliance with one standard and ultimate alignment of different practices and premises. The logical result of this is that Snow Country will become Champs, and transnationalism will ultimately produce homogenization. Addressed on the thematic level, the Cantonese audience disseminated in South(east) Asia and North America are likely to stand in for Hong Kong and desire the West as the ultimate goal.

This thematic teleology, however, signals only one aspect of Zuo's formula reinvention. To confine ourselves to this aspect would risk eliding the film's complex modes of addressing the audience, and simplifying Hong Kong's Cold War era cinema.[11] To adequately understand the film's implications for transnational Chinese cinema, we must also consider its formal reinvention. This is based on mobilizing the foreign form, which correlates to a different mode of audience address. I refer to the film's emphasis on exotic *mise-en-scène* and costuming as a strategy of engaging the audience. This is where the seamless merging between the foreign and the regional, which Ma espoused in his Cantonese opera reform project, becomes questionable. Judging from the publicity materials, a crucial component of the

11. I am indebted to the editors for helping me frame this argument.

'Western costume' plays such as *Baijin long* (1930) and *Xuangong yanshi* (1930) was the use of newfangled Western props. In *Baijin long*, the Western props include cigars, chocolate, telephones, Western style costumes, furnishings, and an exotic-looking barbarian tent (Anon 2007: n. p.). Similarly, *Xuangong yanshi* allows the audience to feast on such visual attractions as a chocolate pistol, wine glasses, oil paintings, a luxurious sofa, and Western aristocratic fashions (Yung 2002: 192).

All of these are inherited by *My Kingdom for a Husband*, now complete with a modernist angular architectural style, an art deco wall painting with a primitive theme, and a claw-foot bathtub (occupying the centre background in the Queen's boudoir). The fantastic *mise-en-scène* produces an unrealistic mode of address, befitting the 'musical comedy', or *gechang da xiju*, as the film was advertised. Comedy, in particular, was perceived as a genre that significantly reconfigured the audience's viewing habits. According to a reviewer of *My Husband for a Kingdom*, the audience conventionally attracted to weepies (*kuqing xi*) that dramatize doomed romance may find it hard to sympathize with characters in a comedy. The only way to entice the audience is to 'soak them in honey', or to indulge them in exotic romance enacted in a newfangled *mise-en-scène* by a top-notch cast (Miao n.d.: n.p.). In addition, the publicity similarly emphasized sensual pleasure by utilizing newly available photographic techniques to produce Kodak colour and wide-screen film stills in order to mislead the audience to expect something more modern than the actual film (shot in black and white, regular screen) (Anon 2002: 285).[12]

Placing these diegetic and extra-diegetic modern and Western attractions next to Cantonese singing (another highlight in the film's advertisement), the film inscribes incongruity.[13] How does such audio-visual incongruity address the audience; what does this mode of address tell us about transnational Chinese cinema? Chen Guanzhong, a Hong Kong writer, recalls his childhood experience with the 1950s 'Western costume' film remakes: the Cantonese opera stars 'passed' as Europeans, Arabians and Indians, then suddenly burst into Cantonese singing, and the audience (including Chen himself) found the incongruity hilarious yet not dissatisfactory (2007: n. p.). Chen further theorizes such incongruity as the essence of Hong Kong culture that constantly bastardizes and localizes imports.

Chen's account usefully underscores Hong Kong's interstitial position and heterogeneous cultural make-up. However, it fails to explain the exact relationship between localization and bastardization, and risks fetishizing the phenomenon of sheer mixture. To recuperate the analytical force of transnationality manifested in the 1950s 'Western costume' films, I emphasize the process of 'trans' and incongruity without predetermined localization. The audio-visual disjuncture in *My Kingdom for a Husband* provides a case in point.

Unlike the thematic aspect that promotes homogenization and Westernization as an ideological agenda, the fantastic visuality and the Cantonese singing address the audience on the sensorial level. Also, unlike many MP & GI urban-themed song-and-dance films that borrow from Hollywood musicals and appeal to the urban youth audience through unified audio-visual modernity,[14] *My Kingdom* addresses the audience by yoking

12. The film pulled in over HK$ 400000, and became one of the highest grossing films at the time.

13. In her study of Sinophone visual culture under globalism, Shih (2007: 16) suggests that the Sinophone visual form more readily travels across boundaries, whereas the linguistic particularities, as indicated in the multiple Chinese dialects, tend to remain local and thus underscore the heterogeneity and untranslatability of Chineseness. Shih's prime example of such visual-linguistic discrepancy is Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which was received differently by Western and Sinophone audiences due to its divergent visual and linguistic modes of address. The 1950s Hong Kong fantasy remakes of Hollywood films similarly display linguistic particularity (insofar as their Cantonese dialogue is distinguished from Mandarin films) and visual universalism. The difference, however, is that instead of marketing 'Chinese' imagery in a self-Orientalist fashion to Western audiences (as *Crouching Tiger* does), these 1950s Hong Kong fantasy remakes deployed the opposite strategy by parading occidentalist imagery and grafting it onto the Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong cast. The targeted audience in the latter case is the globally dispersed Cantonese Chinese who simultaneously relied upon

their native dialect and enjoyed the non-native, occidentalist display.

14. Such examples include *Manbo nülang* (Mambo Girl, Mandarin, 1957) and *Longxiang fengwu* (Calendar Girl, Mandarin, 1958).

15. I am indebted to the editors for urging me to rethink the issue of genre development in relation to the emphasis on transit.

together two incongruous elements – a European palace fantasy and the Xue style of Cantonese singing. Thus, it appeals to the sense of belonging of the disseminated Cantonese speaking audiences by offering a popular brand of hometown culture on the one hand. On the other hand, it teases and satisfies the audience's curiosity for Western luxurious glamour by parading thoroughly exotic settings and costumes.

If the thematic address emphasizes Westernization, the film's formal address simultaneously reinforces Western values and demonstrates the necessity of keeping them foreign and incongruent with the regional culture. This is particularly important for the film's targeted audience, which was widely disseminated and already constantly experiencing split interests and desires. Given their geographical displacement, their sense of self-recognition rested upon the 'espacement' that defines identity as alterity, not repetition (Aiten & Zonn 1994: 211). The film's bifurcated modes of address paralleled their everyday experiences, helping them stage and balance multiple anchors of affiliation in the shifting diasporic processes. The 'foreign' was thus experienced as not simply superfluity, or something to be domesticated or internalized. Rather, its incongruity with the regional highlights self-foreignization as the premise of the audience's self-(re-) recognition. As Lo Kwai-cheung argues, in the context of contemporary Hong Kong popular culture (including cinema), the kernel of the local (or regional) is 'self-estrangement', and the non-local 'can provide a viewpoint from which the local can identify itself as something other than itself' (2005: 123). This paradoxical process of identity formation is figured precisely in the film's incongruous modes of address. The 'foreign' must remain the 'foreign' (rather than becoming domesticated) in order to constitute the Self. The local or regional Self necessarily undergoes constant reconfiguration through slippage and transit.

In this light, *My Kingdom* is transnational not simply because it eclectically draws upon an array of film and operatic traditions. Rather, it stages the *tension* between regional and foreign modes of address, which correspond with the audience's divergent anchors of affiliation. The fact that the tension persists in the genre of 'Western costume' musical comedy indicates the importance of maintaining both attractions in an incongruent and dialectical relationship, so that the audience may continue experimenting with their in-transit and diasporic positioning through movie-viewing activities.[15]

III. Foreignizing the transnational

This leads to a new way of conceptualizing the local–foreign negotiation under globalized colonialism and capitalism. Mignolo highlights bilanguaging as a condition for border thinking (2000: 253). We can extend it to bi-coding or multi-coding to include non-linguistic signifying systems such as cinema. The dual modes of address inscribed in *My Kingdom* demonstrate how bi or multi-coding may underscore and reconfigure the persistent borderline, thereby resisting easy assimilation or translation. As Lawrence Venuti argues in connection with 'foreignizing translation', instead of transposing the foreign into the Self, thereby eliding the difference, 'foreignizing translation' constitutes 'a violent rewriting of the foreign

text [or source text], a strategic intervention into the target-language culture, at once dependent on and abusive of domestic values' (1995: 25). In this process, both the foreign (the source) and the domestic (the target) undergo transformation. As the source is violated, what is considered to be the local or the domestic Self also becomes foreignized as it is subjected to multiple modes of address.

Venuti's 'foreignizing translation' echoes Willemen's 'outside' approach to a foreign cinema. Building upon Mikhail Bakhtin's emphasis on 'dialogic encounter' (Bakhtin 1986: 6–7, qt. in Willemen 2006: 37), Willemen suggests that the outside status allows the critic to raise new questions so as to reveal fresh aspects of the foreign cinema with the result of mutual enrichment (not merging) (2006: 37–41). Whereas Willemen aims to critique Western film scholars' annexation and erasure of non-Western cinemas, his emphasis on outsideness and alterity also provides a new angle for reconsidering transnational Chinese cinema.

To problematize the current depoliticizing tendency in celebrating successful crossover stories, which conveniently imply the all-encompassing quality of Chinese cinema, we should pause and consider how the outsider perspective disrupts the borderless flow. The incongruous modes of address that I have analyzed in connection with *My Kingdom* demonstrate that the necessary divide between the Self and the Other enables their mutual constitution, which leads to border reconfiguration. This is not to prioritize the foreign (or the Western or Hollywood in this case), but rather to use it as a perspective to foreground the foreignization and self-difference of Chinese cinema. To become sensitized to the constant encounter and *friction* between the local and the foreign, and the familiar and the strange, I re-tool the transnational as a methodology, which systematically scrutinizes not just what can be assimilated, how to assimilate, but also what and why some elements remain or are flaunted as the foreign; how the ambiguous modes of address allow us to better understand border politics.

To sum up, a film may contain *multi*national components. However, it does not become meaningfully *trans*national until it registers or elicits border cultural politics in its enunciation, modes of address and exhibition. The significance of transnational Chinese cinema thus lies in its ability to mobilize multivalent modes of address and subject itself to espacement and foreignization. And the goal of the transnational methodology is to unthink and foreignize any type of reification, be it Sino-centrism or Euro-American centrism.

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Suggested citation

Wang, Y. (2008), 'The 'transnational' as methodology: transnationalizing Chinese film studies through the example of *The Love Parade* and its Chinese remakes', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2: 1, pp. 9–21, doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.9/1

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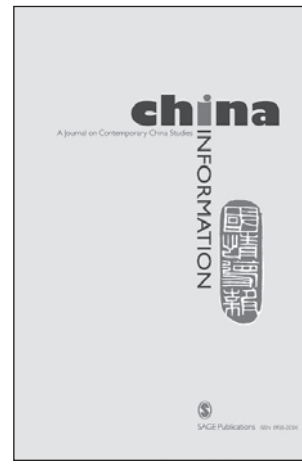

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Journal of Chinese Cinemas Volume 2 Number 1 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.23/1

Inhibition vs. exhibition: political censorship of Chinese and foreign cinemas in postwar Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article traces clandestine film censorship in colonial Hong Kong during the Cold War. Based on film studio records, press coverage, historical accounts, and recently declassified government documents, albeit limited and incomplete, the article examines sample cases and controversial foreign and Chinese films to throw light on the predicament of cross-border film exhibition in a distinctively politicized period. The evidence and arguments in this study point to a different conceptualization of transnationality and boundary-crossing of cinema grounded in its specific historical and geopolitical configuration. It is less about the easy traffic of capital, human resources, commodities, and ideas across the border than the dangerous trafficking of movie images, ideologies, human actions and propagandas that could destabilize the territorial boundary and its political status quo. Film screening and viewing in the colony are subject to strict official surveillance to quarantine the visuality of politics in the shadow of Cold War paranoia.

Keywords

British imperialism
Cold War
colonial film policy
Communist propaganda
political censorship
postwar Hong Kong

This essay looks at Hong Kong between 1950 and 1970 as a distinct film scene of transborder dynamics circumscribed by Cold War factors and colonial rule. In particular, it deals with the politics of foreign film exhibition with a focus on colonial film censorship. Recent scholarship on transnational culture has favoured the erosion of political boundaries and cultural landscapes enabled by the 'global flows' of people, technologies, capital, images, and ideologies across a 'borderless' world (Appadurai 1996: 27–47; Yau 2001). But such a model of globalism fails to address real histories and situations. Informed by new efforts to examine Hong Kong cinema culture in light of broader 'trans-regional' and 'border-crossing' directions (Fu 2000; Law 2000; Morris 2004), my study of the colonial censorial mechanism ventures to throw light on the predicament of cross-border film exhibition in a highly politicized period. Cinema operates on a transnational basis in terms of the distribution and reception of films. The control of visual imagery may well be seen as an effort to contain the flow of images and ideologies across borders. In significant ways, the Cold War was about the transformation of geopolitical boundaries by organizing allies and alignments around the superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. I argue that Britain's interest in sustaining the city's stability and prosperity amidst the global power politics had tremendous bearings on colonial film policy in this period. With the advent of the Korean War

and the neutralization of the Taiwan Strait, the Cold War front extended to East Asia, dragging the colony into the wider conflict of the superpowers. Britain once politicized Hong Kong's status as the 'Berlin of the East' – the colonial outpost resisting the invasion of Communist China – at the same time as the city was inevitably caught up in ongoing conflicts between the Communists and the Kuomintang (KMT) (Louis 1997; Mark 2004; Tsang 1997). Meanwhile, colonial officials were increasingly alert to the dangers of having the movie screen turned into an ideological weapon in the hands of various international powers. It is noteworthy that as much as Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s remained a city of free trade, it was also a contact zone of covert espionage activities and intelligence gathering operated by the People's Republic of China, KMT, and US agencies (Mark 2004: 177–215; Tsang 2006: 167–175). As the city survived on a laissez-faire and entrepôt economy, it could also provide relatively free access for propaganda work through film activities. How does film censoring tell us about the nature of colonial power in regulating the flow of screen images and the imagined worlds? In what ways does the suppression of politics in both national (Chinese) and international (Hollywood, Soviet, European, Asian) cinemas reflect the Cold War paranoia? What is at stake when transborder film screenings are curbed for the sake of political security? Based on limited resources of government documents, film studio records, press coverage, and historical accounts, I attempt to shed light on the conditions of transnational film reception and containment.

All riot on the waterfront

In September 1956, Hollywood film producer Sam Spiegel came to Hong Kong to petition for the release of Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), winner of eight Oscars in 1955. According to Spiegel, the *Hong Kong Standard* reported, the movie was banned because of some 'unfortunate circumstances' ('Better than Paris', 1956: 1) when it was first imported into the city. *On the Waterfront* was eventually passed for exhibition in February 1957 (Raymond 1957), more than two years after the film's worldwide release.

Recently declassified government documents have uncovered the government's furtive decision. This realistic film about labour union corruption disturbed colonial officials for depicting labour unrest in a brutal and savage manner. The film was banned on 10 August 1954. In a memo dated 27 July 1956, the Secretary for Chinese Affairs wrote to the Colonial Secretary to explain the matter:

> It (*On the Waterfront*) was shown at that time when the labor situation in the Colony was definitely tense and there seemed every prospect of the left wing unions indulging in sympathetic strikes in support of the Tramways. Furthermore if I remember rightly there had already been one or two incidents which looked as though they might be attempts at sabotage. The film itself dealt with the struggle of workers not against their employers but against their corrupt trade union bosses, but it was 99% certain that Chinese audiences would not have recognized the fine distinction and would have translated the trade union leaders into capitalist employers, which of course they were.

The Hollywood film intriguingly sent the chill of the Cold War over the colony. Back in the United States, *On the Waterfront* was fiercely embroiled in the Hollywood 'Red Scare' during the notorious McCarthyist 1950s. The provocative movie was criticized as an impassioned defence of the informers in Hollywood, especially director Kazan's testifying before the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to name his former Communist associates. Kazan (1997: 500) later admitted that Terry Malloy's (Marlon Brando) testimony against his gang leader in the film was a dramatic vindication of his whistle-blowing before the HUAC. While the conspiracy of informing generated contention in America, it was the film's spectacle of mob violence that frayed the nerves of Hong Kong censors.

Colonial officials viewed the Hollywood movie through the Cold War lens and teased out the film's sociopolitical metaphors. The Tramways strike that started on Christmas Day 1949 ended with the deportation of the union leaders by the government. Governor Grantham considered the strike 'the first real showdown between the government and the subversive elements' that 'arose over an industrial dispute' (1965: 148). In colonial Hong Kong history, the massive strike-boycott of 1925–1926 must have made Britain especially sceptical of anti-colonial sentiment after 1949. No question Britain saw the new Communist regime as 'violently anti-Western, anti-British, and anti-Hong Kong' (Grantham 1965: 139), as well as an imminent military threat. Another glaring incident in leftist film circles occurred in early 1952 when the government deported over twenty film-makers in suspicion of their involvement in the workers' strike in a film studio. These local disturbances fuelled leftist antagonisms against the colonial authorities under the sway of the Cold War rhetoric of Communism versus capitalism, and nationalism versus colonialism. In October 1956 – just a few months before the screening of *On the Waterfront* – large-scale riots broke out between KMT supporters and Communist loyalists with brutal killings and huge casualties (Hong Kong Governor 1956). These violent left–right rivalries threatened colonial governance.

The decision to ban *On the Waterfront* shows officials' interpretive will to 'over-read' the movie in a political prism. But Kazan's film, an emotionally-charged moral drama of good and evil, infused with 'the atmosphere of hard work and poverty, the desperate need for jobs and wages, the sheer difficulties of surviving' (Sayre 1982: 159), could well have struck a chord about the local reality for nervous Hong Kong officials. No wonder the leftist camp compared the workers' brawl in the film with the 1956 riots in Hong Kong when Communist and KMT workers were involved in a bloody scuffle (Yao 1957: 6). The subtext for curbing the film was the government's fear of potential leftist riots turning the film's labour issue to the loathing of capitalist and colonial society.

Political film censorship

Unlike Britain (Trevelyan 1973) and America (Grieveson 2004; Randall 1968), which had unofficial censoring bodies formed by the industries themselves, British colonial governments directly exercised censorship powers in their colonies. The British were concerned about upholding prestige in their colonial possessions. They heavily censored Hollywood images

containing portrayals of white men and women involved in murders, crimes, and sex for fear of endangering white prestige (Smyth 1983). D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) was accused of blemishing the image of British characters. It was banned in India (Vasudev 1978: 26) and withdrawn from public release in Shanghai in 1923 (Chen 2006: 119).

In this larger context, Hong Kong's situation was unique. So far there has been no evidence showing active official participation or penetration in local movie industries in terms of production and business. A 1948 conference on colonial film activities after World War Two 'The Film in Colonial Development' actually revealed nothing significant in colonial film promotion in Hong Kong, unlike Britain's efforts elsewhere in Africa, India, the West Indies, and Malaya. Nor had the British deliberately released their propaganda films in Hong Kong to advance their political cause. For instance, there was no local release record of Michael Anderson's *Yangtse Incident: The Story of HMS Amethyst* (a.k.a. *Battle Hell*) (1957), a British-made war movie meant to hail British naval valour against the Communist attack on the Yangtze in 1949.

Britain's lack of interest in the cultural production of cinema paradoxically went hand in hand with its active interference in film exhibition in postwar Hong Kong. After 1950, the government severely regulated film exhibition and tightened censorship laws. In a draft letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on 11 August 1952, the Public Relations Officer proposed a 'blanket ban' on all 'American feature films glorifying the action of U.S. troops in the Korean war', on 'films glorifying the Nationalist Government in Formosa', and on 'films portraying racial strife (Negro/White American) etc.'. Such films were 'more dangerous to the security of the Colony' than films with explicit violence and sex descriptions. Besides the problem of hundreds of imported films (392 English-language films out of a total of 659 feature films that year), this officer remarked, censors should also be wary of propaganda exercises in 'a large and flourishing native industry making films in vernacular dialects' (221 Chinese-language feature films). Indeed, British colonials thereafter considered Hong Kong a potential production and distribution base of Communist films. In a letter to the Commonwealth Relations Office in London, dated 22 May 1963, the Jamaican Commissioner expressed worries about the import of Communist films through Hong Kong, and proposed to place Hong Kong-imported films on specific licensing.

A 1950 issue of the 'Terms of Reference for Film Censors' unveiled the government's internal instructions to curtail offensive and political contents:

1. Any incidents which exacerbate political rivalries and are likely to arouse strong political feelings.
2. Anything which is liable to provoke feelings of racial or national hostility, e.g. anti-foreign slogans, misleading comparisons between different political systems, unnecessary show of armed forces tending to glorify the military spirit and create impressions that the military might of any one particular state is superior to all others.
3. Anything which incites any section of the community to attempt to overthrow by force the established government.

4. Anything which is liable to prejudice unfavorably relations with friendly powers, and which in particular derides or ridicules the head of states with which His Majesty's Government is in friendly relations.

It was not until 1953 that the government established the official Film Censorship Regulations, issued under The Places of Public Entertainment Ordinance. The boards that oversaw and reviewed films were composed of senior public servants, police officers, and appointed retirees in the respected professions of law and education. The censoring system was problematic as it was exercised entirely under strict confidentiality. The legislature granted censors power in vetting films but excluded the public and the film industry from knowing about the government's assessments and decision-making. For more than thirty years the secretive film censoring remained in effect without much public awareness until the government was challenged on the basis of an implied mechanism of political censorship, which had long been operative without legal basis (Chan 1988; Ching 1987).

It was the amalgamation of economic aggression and political conservatism that provided officials with the excuses for political film censorship. 'Hong Kong has apparently for a long time banned political films of a character likely to affect their relations with neighboring states or create internal trouble', confided correspondence between the Colonial Office and Foreign Office on 1 September 1965. Much later a top official reiterated, according to the *South China Morning Post*, that official censorship was necessary because 'intelligence from various countries, including China, Taiwan, North and South Korea, had shown keen interest in the territory where information could be passed easily in the free port' ('Political censorship "essential"', 1988: 4). The British sought to minimize the risks of the Cold War by cultivating an approach of non-interference with the Communist and KMT powers. The guiding motto of neutrality in international power play nevertheless also informed local operations of interventionist film control.[1]

Screening out China

The exercise of political film censorship can be seen as having been vital to maintaining delicate peace and economic development for the colony. Hong Kong gained considerable economic leverage by politically distancing itself from the superpowers and balancing between China and Britain. It was arguably the absence or relative weakness of nationalism in Hong Kong that gave it a special advantage in the world economy and success in the global market (Duara 2007). In this sense, a principal duty of censorship in the colony was to cleanse the movie screen of the spectacle and ideology of the nation state, that is, 'China'. For years government officials were 'hysterically afraid of the Five-Star Flag and Mao Zedong icons' (Zhou 2002: 184) on screen, and they prohibited all shots of Chinese leaders, political rallies, national flags and emblems, Communist or KMT, from films and documentaries.

There is no reliable figure yet on the excluded mainland movies in the early period. A partial picture is given by the Southern Film Corporation (*Nanfang yingye gongsi*), the major mainland film distributor in Hong Kong.

1. In the years 1965–1974, 34 films (out of 357 banned movies) were excluded on political grounds. These controversial political films came from countries including China, Taiwan, South Korea, Pakistan, India, Philippines, Israel, United States, Canada, England, and France. In 1973–1987, 21 films (out of 8,400 films submitted) were banned on political grounds: eight from Taiwan, three each from Hong Kong and Vietnam, two from China, and one each from North Korea, United States, France, Japan, and Italy. See Pomery (1988).

Xu Dunle, the boss of the distribution company, reckoned that it submitted altogether 59 feature films and documentaries, and 34 newsreels and film shorts for inspection in 1953–56, and only five feature films, six opera films, and six documentaries were permitted for exhibition (2005: 33–48). Films related to recent political history or themes like class exploitation, women's liberation, and heroism were, without exception, subject to the censor's scissors or bans. Films on Communist warfare against the Nationalist army were rejected outright, including Tang Xiaodan's *Fighting North and South* or *From Victory to Victory* (*Nanzheng beizhan*) (1952) and *Reconnaissance across the Yangtze* (*Dujiang zhenchaji*) (1954). Stories that touched upon Sino-British relationships like Zheng Junli's *The Opium War* (*Lin Zexu*, a.k.a. *Yapian zhanzheng*) (1959) were taboo. Movies about the War of Resistance against Japan were rarely approved, such as Shui Hua's *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü*) (1950). Nor would colonial censors fail to examine melodramas through a political lens. Sang Hu's *New Year's Sacrifice* (*Zhufu*) (1956) underwent the excisions of scenes containing 'extreme cruelty to the poor people' before the film was approved.[2] Xie Jin's *Woman Basketball Player No.* 5 (*Nülan wuhao*) (1957) did not pass inspection simply because it contained scenes of raising the PRC national flag and people singing the PRC anthem.

Scarcely known is the history of screening Soviet films in postwar Hong Kong. Xu (2005: 19–30) recalled that about 100 Soviet films were screened in Hong Kong in 1946–53, constituting a major type of foreign film after the Hollywood and British categories.[3] It could well be in line with the PRC foreign policy to introduce Soviet films into the British colony as a means of ideological contestation. Obviously, after 1950, the government imposed more restrictions on Soviet movies. For example, the newsreels *USSR Today* (1950–52) and feature films like *The Battle for Tsaritsyn* (1942), *Battle of Stalingrad* (1949–50), and *How the Steel was Tempered* (1942) were banned for containing 'anti-British', 'anti-democratic', or 'harmful propaganda' messages.[4]

The degree of popularity of the Communist repertoire, however, varied among the Chinese spectators in the colony. Feature films dwelling on contemporary political reality seemingly held little appeal for Hong Kong people. Documentaries about New China's development and people's daily lives fared slightly better. The highest grossing movies were generally opera adaptations and folk music, including Sang Hu's *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai*) (1954) based on the Shanghai Yue opera, Xu Tao's *Search the School* (*Shou shuyuan*) adapted from a Cantonese opera (1956), and Shi Hui's *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (*Tianxian pei*) (1955), which would later inspire the *Huangmei* opera tradition. The popularity of opera dramas points to audience identification with the cultural but not ideological and political orientations in the movie world. (Opera films spawned some great commercial successes. A prominent example was Li Hanxiang's *The Love Eterne* [*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai*] [1963].)

In the eyes of the colonial rulers, cultural entertainment might manifest the 'cultural politics' of the tense Cold War climate. Propaganda only works well if it is also good entertainment. On 19 February 1963 the Colonial Secretariat wrote to the Colonial Office to express anxiety about some

2. Censorship card record, 12 June 1957. Courtesy of the Southern Film Corporation.

3. The Soviet movies released in Hong Kong included films on war and the revolution such as *Lenin in 1918* (1939), *Lenin in October* (1939), and *Chapayev* (1934). But Sergei Eisenstein's classic *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was never shown. There were also literary adaptations understood in terms of the local category '*wenyipian*', which appealed to younger and intellectual audiences, such as *The Childhood of Maxim Gorky* (1938), *White Nights* (1959), adapted from Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1959) adapted from Mikhail Sholokhov's classics, and Soviet adaptations of Shakespeare's plays like *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Among others, *The Kuban Cossacks* (translated as *Xingfu de shenghuo*), a coloured feature film that celebrated Soviet peasant life, was popular thanks to the film's theme songs. The import of Soviet films was halted in mid-1960s when Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated.

4. Censorship card records. Courtesy of the Southern Film Corporation.

successful visits of Chinese theatrical troupes and musicians, which apparently enjoyed wide appeal among local Chinese audiences. 'While there is no doubt a certain amount of genuine non-political nostalgic demand for these shows', this official suspected, 'what they are after is the propaganda and prestige dividend'. The official urged to 'try to keep the situation under control and not let them get out of hand', as he did not wish to see that 'rivalry in it between Peking and Taipei intensified'. The official also cautioned in an earlier letter on 17 October 1962 that the government should not let the Communists 'secure a monopoly of popular culture'.

The local Communist camp escalated their resistance against the censorship measures at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. In early September of 1965 the left wing press embarked on a publicity campaign to condemn Hong Kong censors. The *Wen Wei Pao* and *Ta Kung Pao* denounced the government's 'unreasonable restrictions' on mainland films including Xie Jin's *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*) (1961) and *Glorious Festival* (*Guanghui de jieri*), a documentary of the 1964 October 1 National Day celebration in Beijing. On 11 September Governor Trench sent an urgent telegram to warn London that 'the left wing are out to make an issue of this'. The Board of Review apparently succumbed to pressure and soon passed *Glorious Festival*, but it upheld the ban on *Red Detachment of Women* (the film was not approved until 1971) because the film involved warfare between the Communist and KMT forces. *The Star*, an English newspaper, considered the incident a great setback for the government as censors were 'loosening their pressure on Chinese films' ('HK film censors easing Red China curbs', 1965: 6).

China on screen

Ironically, when the government yielded to leftist pressure, Communist movies had already entirely lost their appeal to Hong Kong moviegoers. The Director of Information Service reported on 27 October 1970 that 'Communist films have very restricted outlets in Hong Kong and are seldom seen by a wide uncommitted audience'. During the decade of the Cultural Revolution, surprisingly, the Southern Film Corporation was allowed to show some propaganda films (Xu 2005: 231–35). The unpopularity of the crude PRC productions could be one reason for relaxing official control on mainland films. One also surmises that colonial officials would not want to infuriate leftist radicals by severely limiting their films, especially after the 1967 riots in the colony, which occurred as a spillover from the Cultural Revolution. During the later period, conversely, there were more cases of foreign and local movies offending the censors by alluding to political upheaval in China. Internal reminders circulated by the Review Board on 20 November 1965 revealed the government's stance of pursuing impartiality between Beijing, Taiwan, and other foreign powers. Censors were instructed to screen out mainland films eulogizing Mao Zedong or displaying Communist military might, as well as excluding Taiwan and English-speaking films with derogatory remarks on mainland China or Chinese leaders. The control over provocative film materials in non-PRC films could be seen as a pragmatic strategy to cater to locally mounting leftist pressures as well as to appease China as a dominant power across the border.

Films supported by Taiwan money and personnel and unfavourably depicting recent Chinese political and social life were easily suspected of Communism-bashing. The draconian measures imposed on Taiwan-affiliated films were consistent with the government's continual attempt to avoid Communist–KMT rivalry. Tang Shu Shuen's *China Behind* (*Zaijian Zhongguo*) (1974), a film (mostly shot in Taiwan) about some mainland students fleeing into Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution, was banned when it met vehement leftist criticism. Notable cases of suppressing Taiwan films included Pai Ching-jui's (Bai Jingrui) *The Coldest Winter in Peking* (*Huangtian houtu*) (1981). Centred on the atrocities of the Gang of Four, the film was withdrawn promptly after showing for just one day. Wang Tong's *If I Were Real* (*Jiaru woshi zhende*) (1981), a film inspired by Nikolai Gogol's satirical play *The Inspector General* (1836) and based on Sha Yexin's rewriting into a story about a Chinese swindler, was prohibited.

A remarkable domestic example was a film made by Hong Kong director Lung Kong. Originally called *The Plague*, and loosely based on Albert Camus' *La Peste* (1947), the film portrayed an apocalyptic vision of the city after it was struck by a rat epidemic. The left wing circles instigated the film as a political satire of the riots of 1967 and the Cultural Revolution – an allegorical invasion of the Reds. The distributor deliberately held the film back for two years until 1970 when it was commercially released in a drastically cut version and renamed as *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (*Zuotian jintian mingtian*), curiously synonymous with Vittorio De Sica's 1963 film (*Ieri, oggi, domani*). In the same year Lung Kong's film screened, Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966) was banned because of its 'excessive violence and its strong anti-colonialist theme' (Barbieri 1997: 112). The ban was lifted in 1974 to allow the film's exhibition only in a private film club.

Censors were equally cautious in blocking Hollywood productions potentially containing anti-Communist polemics or unpleasant portrayals of China. An internal circular for censors in November 1963 showed that John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), a political thriller on the Korean war, was 'interpreted as a flagrant political attack' on Chinese Communism and hence was barred. In the same year, *Tsen Pao* revealed the official rejection of Nicholas Ray's 55 *Days at Peking* (1963) because the film 'relates to politics' and 'may cause unrest' ('Film to be banned', 1963). But it was J. Lee Thompson's *The Chairman* (1969) that sparked huge anti-American sentiment among local Chinese radicals. The film starred Gregory Peck as the scientist sent on a mysterious mission to China to steal the secret of a chemical enzyme. A sense of enmity was added to the film's British title, *The Most Dangerous Man in the World*, a dual reference to both Chairman Mao and the explosive micro-transmitter which secret agents implant in the head of Peck. The story had a thematic parallel to Alfred Hitchcock's Cold War suspense film, *Torn Curtain* (1966), in which an American scientist (Paul Newman) pretended to defect to East Germany to obtain Communist defence secrets.[5]

The Chairman enraged Chinese activists by depicting Red Guard violence. The unprecedented impersonation of Mao (played by Japanese

5. I am indebted to William Tay for this note.

actor Conrad Yama) would further have made the film a 'sacrilege' that dwarfed the Chinese leader. The film was submitted to the censors in September 1969 and banned outright. The *South China Morning Post* reported that the film's shooting in the colony was dogged by political trouble as soon as it started ('Govt bans shooting of *Chairman* film in Hong Kong', 1968: 9). Unable to enter China, the film crew went to Hong Kong and met with hostile demonstrations and threats from communist activists. The government was pressured to cancel official permission for the filming (while the director managed to steal some Hong Kong scenes from private cabs on his exit). The film took most of the location shots in Taiwan. The Taiwan government, however, hoped the film would deliver an image of Mao as a 'senile old man' ('Govt bans shooting of *Chairman* film in Hong Kong', 1968: 9). The authorities refused permission for the Taiwan National Museum to be used as Mao's residence in the film. A funeral parlour was proposed instead. Eventually a temple was used where Peck plays a ping-pong game in his first interview with Chairman Mao! Ironically, *The Chairman* was also banned in Taiwan, as a 'pro-Communist' film because it featured the icons of Five-Star Flags and Mao, as well as exuding a revolutionary fervour (Liang 2004: 191–92). The *South China Morning Post* carried reports that local Taiwan newspapers complained about the 'glamorous' portrayal of women Red Guards in the film as 'wearing fashionable high-heeled shoes and elaborate hair-dos' ('Taiwan to inspect *The Chairman* film', 1968: 1).

Left wing opponents in Hong Kong accused *The Chairman* of insulting their national leader. They vowed to cause havoc if it was ever filmed or shown in the city. A bomb scare was reported in town in connection with a local Communist plan to oppose its filming. *The Star* quoted the movie director as saying that the film crew had been 'victimized by a band of hotheads' ('Peck: armed guard', 1968: 1). Thompson was furious at the government's 'disgraceful' decision to ban the filming, and blamed a 'minority of Communist troublemakers' (Chibnall 2000: 314–18). The director recalled that he had armed guards to protect the crew on board the flight between Taiwan and London via the colony. News of the filming spread to Guangdong, *The Star* reported, where rioters staged anti-United States rallies. Some protesters even burned effigies of President Johnson and Peck ('Red Guards run wild', 1968: 4).

When China was closed to the outside world, Hong Kong (with Taiwan) was preferred as the setting for Hollywood productions to simulate scenes of China's historical events. Robert Wise's *The Sand Pebbles* (1966), a story about an American gunboat in the Yangtze in 1926, had most of the Chinese scenes shot on Hong Kong's islands, in Taiwan's port city Keelung and on the Tamsui River (as stand-in scenes for the Yangtze). Earlier examples like Henry King's *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955) and Richard Quine's *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) focused on Hong Kong as a place from where their American heroes set out for Chinese territories and romantically engaged with Chinese heroines. The colonial locale filled in the gap for Hollywood as a stand-in for 'China on screen', providing a cinematic platform for the imagination of the frontier-crossings of foreign powers in their uneasy negotiations with Communist China.

Coda

This essay has highlighted cases of controversial Chinese and foreign movies and revealed relevant archival records about their failed or delayed entries to the colony. The fact that these films could not be seen by the public in the past (most of them are now available in video format) unveils much about the social and political tensions surrounding the censorship mechanism. My study looks at the issue of audience reception in the light of inhibition and restriction. I contend that the dynamics of prohibiting screen images were crucially tied up with the historical predicament whereby the colony was thrown into transnational Cold War politics. These movies were hampered when cross-border film projections and productions were deemed to imperil the city's relations with neighbouring countries. The significantly missing episode of Soviet film circulation in the former British colony is worthy of further scrutiny. The Communist venture to compete with popular Hollywood genres illustrates how the colonial site was once turned into an ideologically contested arena in the globalized Cold War situation. Historical evidence, however, indicates that leftist efforts to deliver the vision of New China or Communist Soviet life held little appeal for local Chinese audiences. While leftists continued to fight for their strategic space in mass culture, it remains dubious whether they could effectively utilize the 'soft power' of cinema to consolidate or 'unite' the colony's Chinese inhabitants, which in great part comprised diverse communities of the Chinese diaspora inclined to distance themselves from Chinese national politics. This study also helps to rethink the dialectics of boundary crossing and blockage in the current discourse of globalization and cultural exchange. The claim of relatively autonomous cultural traffic sweeping through the globe is problematic in a contact zone of historical and geopolitical complexity. Censorial provisions are the expression of colonial mandate to impose territorial control against detrimental elements brought about by the movement of films and ideologies across borders. For colonial officials, screen projections of China, about lived realities or imagined worlds, may run the risk of transgressing or subverting territorial boundaries and colonial sovereignty.

In short, I submit that colonial film censorship functioned to domesticate the local film scene by suppressing blatant or latent national narratives in Chinese films and nationalistic consciousness aroused in transnational filmic discourse, in the service of maintaining the colony's political stability and economic progress. Adopting an even-handed approach, the authorities vetted political subjects in PRC-produced films as well as foreign and Taiwan-affiliated counterparts. Meanwhile, the case of *The Chairman* exemplified the power of supranational corporations and Hollywood capital to imagine American transgressions across the restricted frontiers of 'Red' China. The fury that erupted around the shooting of the film demonstrated the nationalistic resentment of left wing agitators toward negative depictions of China. The deferred showing of *On the Waterfront* testified to the Cold War terror in the minds of colonial officials, who over-interpreted the film – literally having nothing to do with China – according to a local political frame of reference. The British experience in Hong Kong may well have struck a chord with its colonial counterparts in Shanghai of the 1920s and 30s. Then, the French and British authorities

frowned on nationalistic Chinese films, and encountered rising protests of Chinese nationalists and anti-imperialists in the foreign concessions against foreign movies allegedly presenting degraded images of China (Xiao 1997). British colonialists in Hong Kong had to tackle tougher global situations. Officials believed that the success of economic laissez-faire was dependent on minimizing the impact of the Cold War and Chinese national dynamics. To what extent the historical suppression of the national and the depoliticization of the local movie scene has contributed to a Hong Kong cinema identity 'without a nation', but with the characteristics of being at once 'local' and 'transnational', is not an easy question. Future work can be done to uncover their possible connections on both empirical and theoretical levels.

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Suggested citation

Ng, K. K. K. (2008), 'Inhibition vs. exhibition: political censorship of Chinese and foreign cinemas in postwar Hong Kong', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2: 1, pp. 23–35, doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.23/1

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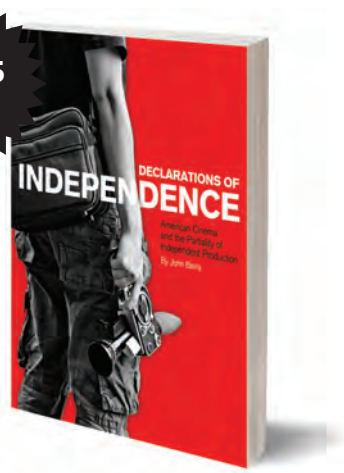

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Journal of Chinese Cinemas Volume 2 Number 1 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.37/1

Re-nationalizing China's film industry: case study on the China Film Group and film marketization

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Darrell William Davis *University of New South Wales*

Abstract
In the mid 1990s 'transnational' meant a pan-Chinese universalism trying to reconcile the differences and conflicts among the mainland, colonial Hong Kong, KMT Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora. But since the rise of the new China market and the centralization of Chinese blockbusters, the transnational currency may have been replaced by an intra-national, if not hyper-national tender. The essay addresses the tension and dialectics between marketization and protectionism of the national screen industry in China. A political-economic approach analyzes the rise of the China Film Group (CFG) and its attempt to re-nationalize and transnationalize Chinese cinema. Accounting for recent developments of pan-Asian strategy, and CEPA, this case study will explain tensions inherent in China's integration to global media. CFG presents marketization as liberalization but this is part of a scheme to utilize the market to consolidate state power.

Keywords
film marketization
China Film Group Corporation
market reforms
CEPA
re-nationalization

Introduction
From the 1950s, film of the People's Republic of China has exemplified a radical cinema in both content and industrial structure, with national subsidies, central planning, and tight management of output and exhibition. Led by a socialist creed, PRC cinema was imbued with convictions of national authenticity and party-state sovereignty. But this state-backed radical cinema crumbled in the 1980s when the socialist system was riddled with inefficiency and mismanagement. 'Reform and opening' was announced: sweeping economic policies intended to save Chinese industry from complete collapse. In despair, the concept of market economy – marketization – was introduced to rejuvenate the industry. Hence, like other industries in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese cinema underwent a series of wrenching structural reforms, gradually transforming from a state propaganda apparatus to a market-oriented, profit-driven enterprise. The Communist Party accepted market economy as the correct path to China's new life, illustrated in Deng Xiaoping's famous remark: 'as long as the cat catches mice, who cares if it's black or white?' The switch to a quasi-capitalist system was by no means straightforward. Because of the media's crucial place in maintaining the one-party socialist state, marketization was introduced into the film industry with some

trepidation. The key was to design and implement marketization so that cinema remained in the right hands. So instead of completely privatizing its economy, as in Russia and Eastern Europe, China opted to introduce market mechanisms to its state-owned enterprises (SOEs). These firms then were allowed to convert into shareholding corporations (Larus 2005: 2). The corporatization of SOEs let state proxies gain a crucial foothold in the nascent market. These measures are seen as necessary means to differentiate Chinese film marketization from capitalist economies, i.e., a 'socialist market economy' (Zhu 2002: 909) or a market economy with Chinese characteristics.

The Chinese characteristics – namely, state bodies presiding over privatization of a national industry – reveal persistent continuation of ideological safeguards and economic protectionism in the screen industry. This is paradoxical, though not necessarily unworkable. But how long can such controls be employed? Can they be sustained indefinitely? With China under pressure to 'play fair' on the field of global media, how can state influence maintain its old advantages? What changes have been brought to Chinese national cinema in the era of market-oriented economy?

Prior studies on this topic focused on the country's economic and cultural reform, between 1983 and 1989 (Zhao 1998; Zhu 2002; Zhu 2003; Berry 2003; Lee 2003). Zhu Ying's work is a key documentation of progressive policy changes to reform the Chinese film industry and rescue it from the ashes. Drawing on Chinese sources, Zhu's studies centre on the 1990s; since then there have been several major changes, notably rapid corporatization, conglomeration, rejuvenation of old state studios and reform of the distribution–exhibition system. Further, China's screen industry has accelerated its transnational activities in co-productions and joint ventures absorbing outside investment in infrastructure. Amidst the structural transformation and corporate strategies, China Film Group Corporation (CFG) stands out as the most revealing case. As the largest media conglomerate, CFG is the most powerful and effective in the country. Being state owned, it is responsible for carrying out state policy, including propaganda functions, cultivation of markets and co-production development. It is in this dual capacity that we discern the tension and dialectics between marketization and protectionism of the national screen industry.

The major part of the essay is a case study of CFG, its history, mandate and current activities. The rest will describe recent developments of the co-production strategy, including CEPA, the 'Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement' between China and Hong Kong. All these highlight tensions inherent in China's integration with global media. These tensions concern the difficulty of reaping the benefits of marketization, efficiency and privatization while clinging to national priorities of state control, both industrial and cultural. China's new transnational cinema really means appropriation of commercial incentives without the attendant risks of real market liberalization. Ultimately, this brings the re-nationalization and 'hyper-nationalization' of Chinese cinema, not its attenuation as one might predict in the era of global markets and audiences.

China Film Group Corporation

China Film Group Corporation (*Zhongguo dianying jituan gongsi*) started in 1951 as China Film Management Corporation (*Zhongguo yingpian jingli gongsi*), in charge of nationwide distribution. The company was renamed China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation in 1958. Then in 1971 it was consolidated with China Film Archive and China Film Equipment Corporation to become China Film Corporation (CFC). The consolidation broke up a few years later but the CFC name continued. Under the centralized, planned economy, CFC's role was to carry out the so-called 'central buying and underwriting' (*tonggou baoxiao*), a task divided into three parts. First, the company acted as a wholesale agent, acquiring all films produced by the state-owned studios, which were film factories unconcerned with distribution, sales or promotion. CFC covered the cost of making prints for nationwide circulation. CFC then relayed films through its multi-layered distribution system based on a hierarchical ladder – first Beijing and other major cities, then the provincial capitals, and finally the municipal seats and counties. It also needed to handle the promotion of the films, providing guidance to its branch distribution units and the exhibition circuits. CFC's second duty was to import appropriate foreign films onto China's screens, initially socialist films from the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cuba and other revolutionary film industries. The third was to export Chinese films abroad, to festivals, art houses and educational programmes.

CFC is thus the agency responsible for the most crucial part of any film industry – sales and distribution. It was entirely subsidized by the government, ensuring CFC purchased outright all films made by the studios. In 1986, CFC's supervision was moved from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT, est. 1982), responding to the reclassification of film as a cultural industry rather than a propaganda apparatus (Zhu 2003: 19). By this time there were serious financial losses in the centralized system despite measures to allow local distributors to become stakeholders in the business. Yet studios and theatres continued to lose audiences to television, home video and other entertainments.

In 1992, the entire film industry had a total loss of 70 million RMB (US$ 8.8 million). In 1994 the box office plunged to 1.1 billion RMB, the lowest point for the industry, showing a near 50 per cent decline in revenue and 12 billion loss in admissions, compared to 1990 (see Table 1). In 1994, the seventeen state studios together had a profit margin of less than half a million – the industry was about to expire (Fan et al. 1997).

In this dire situation MRFT opened the domestic market to foreign imports, especially Hollywood pictures, with a strict quota of ten films per year. Under the new policy (*liangge jibun*) Chinese viewers could see films with the 'two basics': those that 1) 'basically reflect the accomplishments of the world's civilization and 2) basically express the achievements of contemporary aesthetics and techniques' (Wu 1994). MRFT's CFC was the sole company to handle these lucrative imports.

Importation of Hollywood films was not just a political decision to open China to the world but an economic strategy to save the film industry from its worst slump since the 1950s. The new rule of the game used a 'revenue split' (*fenzhang*) to ensure profits for all Chinese parties. While Hollywood

Year	Number of Production	Annual Box Office (RMB Billion)	Admission (billion)
1990	126	2.22	16.2
1991	130	2.36	14.4
1992	170	1.99	10.5
1993	154	1.3	4.2
1994	148	1.1	3

Table 1: China's film production and returns.
Sources: China Film Yearbook *(1990–1995)*

majors bore heavy taxes and tariffs, and the costs of marketing and prints, CFC would share up to 46 per cent of the total box office; the provincial distributors would take 8–10 per cent and theatre operators 44–46 per cent (Song 1995). Steering this mission was CFC, central player in the execution of state policy and the major beneficiary of foreign imports: 23 per cent of the entire revenue. In late 1994, Warner Bros' *The Fugitive* (1993) was imported by CFC as the first 'big ten' film allowed into China. The film grossed 25 million RMB, dwarfing the top selling Chinese film (*Chungking Negotiation*) by more than 17 million (Wang and Lian 2005). CFC's 1995 top film *True Lies* (Twentieth Century Fox) brought in a box office of RMB120 million (Wang and Lian 2005), successfully rejuvenating the market, injecting vital capital to the failing industry, and guaranteeing jobs for nearly half a million workers in the Chinese film industry.

The 'big ten' import policy took the industry to a new stage and helped CFC regain its flagship position. The split-revenue Hollywood pictures were the pillars in the newly rekindled market. Altogether they made up 80 per cent of the total box office revenue in 1995 (Wang and Lian 2005) and 70–80 per cent in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai in 1996 with pictures such as *Forrest Gump, The Lion King,* and *Independence Day* (Fan et al. 1997). These were soon swamped by the economic and political impact of *Titanic* the following year. The huge profits not only demonstrated China's market potential in film consumption but also galvanized more radical reforms that would eventually lead CFC to become China's number one film player.

In China's film reform, Hollywood (called 'the wolf' by journalists) was more than an invader: it was used as a financial and institutional instrument. Along with the blockbuster films, CFC adapted the Hollywood system, especially in corporate structure. To wedge government sway into the booming market, an industry heavyweight was needed, vertically and horizontally converged, especially on the eve of China's World Trade Organization (WTO) accession (see CFG chart below). To comply with the WTO, China must open its markets and the problem now was how to safeguard its own interests in the domestic sphere, anticipating keen competition from abroad. To prepare, China Film Group Corporation (CFG) was formed under the newly restructured State Administration of Radio, Film

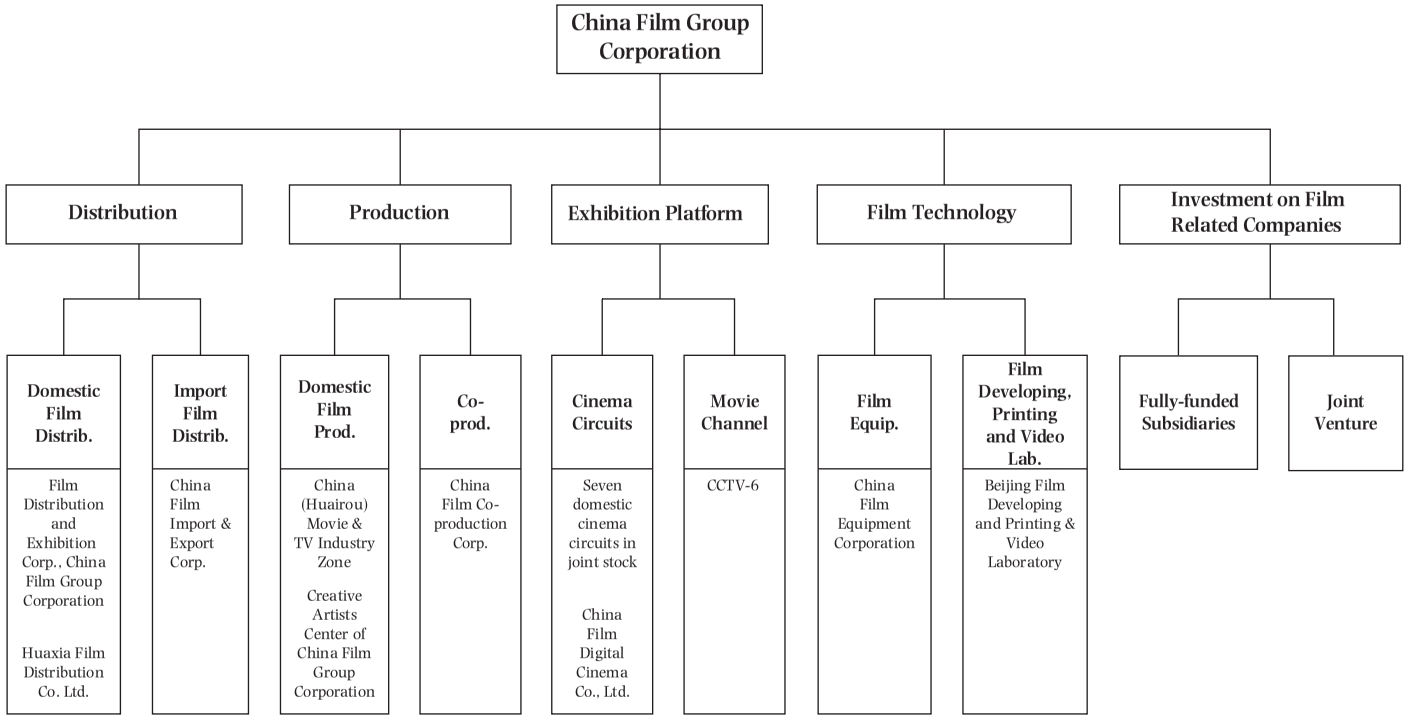

Chart: CFG corporate structure.

Source: 'Corporate Structure', China Film Group Corporation *official website.*

and Television (SARFT, replacing MRFT in 1998). In February 1999, eight formerly separate entities were consolidated into China's foremost media corporation: China Film Corporation, plus Beijing Film Studio, China Children's Film Studio, China Film Co-production Corporation, China Film Equipment Corporation, China Movie Channel, Beijing Film Developing and Printing & Video Laboratory, Huayun Film & TV Compact Discs Company. With this, CFG officially became 'the most comprehensive and extensive state-owned film enterprise in China with the most complete industry chain that facilitates film production, distribution and exhibition as a coordinated process and integrates film, TV and video into one single entity' (CFG website).

From the corporate structure of CFG we see streamlined operations, secure access and shareholding in film/television assets, and alignment of various sectors to build a mega-media entity. In both super- and infra-structure, CFG is eager to establish a dominant position in the newly expanded marketplace. In its mission statement, the group listed five cornerstone industries as foci of development: film and television production, film distribution and exhibition, digital cinema, film import/export, and investment in cinema construction. These cornerstone industries include post-production, equipment leasing, marketing and merchandising, optical disc manufacture, advertising, property management, and real estate development. The group also takes the lead in financing, co-production, joint ventures, and cinema circuits. As a result, CFG owns 14 fully funded subsidiaries, 34 major holding companies and joint stock companies, and the only movie channel (CCTV-6) in the country, with a total asset worth of 2.8 billion RMB. The urge to monopolize is apparent and stems from the company's government origins. For further understanding of CFG's role in exercising the state's total market control, two aspects – market entry and market share – will be examined.

Market entry: regulating distribution

A nation-state exercises control in two ways when it undertakes deregulation and opens its market to foreign products – market entry and market share. In addition to being the state's largest media operator, CFG gets priority in access to and share of the new media marketplace.

Access to China's film market is tightly regulated by SARFT, CFG's supervising authority. CFG naturally enjoys a 'most favored' position in the execution of state policy, such as the foreign import quota, now increased to twenty since China's 2001 entry to the WTO. Distribution remains off limits to foreign investment although global capital is allowed for spending on exhibition, co-production and film and video sales through joint ventures with Chinese partners. Distribution of foreign films is controlled solely by CFG, and thus acquisition, release schedules, and, indirectly, censorship are its responsibility. In 2006 another firm, Huaxia, was authorized as a second distributor for foreign movies, though CFG's monopoly remains in place since it owns a 20 per cent share of Huaxia (see CFG chart).

CFG also handles the so-called 'blackout periods', those times when foreign films and advertising are banned, especially those from Hollywood. Suspension is required under the 'domestic film protection months'

that SARFT and the Ministry of Culture introduced in 1998 (Zhu 2003:145). During blackout periods, CFG must cease from releasing Hollywood pictures, including those already approved. Normally, 'domestic film protection' coincides with important political anniversaries or events in the capital. At times when authorities want to reinforce political solidarity and national sentiment, infiltration of foreign influences is banned, including entertainment products like movies.

Occasionally, the political aim of suspending foreign products is extended to commercial competition. Rulings may emanate from sources higher than SARFT, such as the Communist Party's Propaganda Department. To ensure dominance of Chinese movies in the busy year-end periods, a three-month protection period was suddenly imposed in early December 2007. During this time imports from Disney, DreamWorks, Paramount and Warners were expecting clearance to play, but were suddenly shut out (Frater 2007a). Instead, Chinese screens showed *dapian* blockbusters such as Peter Chan's *The Warlords* (2007), Feng Xiaogang's *Assembly* (2007), Stephen Chow's *CJ No. 7* (2008) and Taiwan/Hong Kong co-production *Kungfu Dunk* (2008). This seems the longest blackout period China has imposed on foreign films since its entry to WTO, following a number of diplomatic and trade spats between China and the United States. Here we see administrative barriers imposed on market decentralization and liberalization: a tangle of connections, checkpoints and obligations, and all answer to the state.

Market share: exhibition and production

Marketization has proven an effective solution to a failing economy, social unrest and political crisis. Since the advent of film marketization in China, the state authority was keen on having a market structure to grow domestic film as well as use its market size to demonstrate China's media power to the world. Market size, though, must be complemented by substantial infrastructure, hence the rapid construction of reliable cinemas around the country. Cinema construction, like real estate development, requires large amounts of capital, utilities, land – and official approvals documenting corporate compliance. Instead of building real estate itself, China Film Group uses cinema circuits to control exhibition by way of distribution. CFG now actively links theatre circuits (*yuanxian*), including digital screening and distribution, and organizes distribution and exhibition into the same network. In 2006 the government invested 30 million RMB in rural areas to promote digital cinemas (Yeung 2007). Though the *yuanxian* – cinema circuit – concept is new, it is considered essential to the growth of the industry and a top priority to expand the film market in China (Luo 2007). By 2007, in joint ventures with Hong Kong, Korean, Japanese and Western investors, CFG formed seven cinema circuits around the country (Han 2007). A total of 400 theatres have been incorporated in these circuits, taking 40 per cent of the domestic box office. The CFG cinema circuits include Beijing Xinyinglian Cinema Circuit, China Film South Cinema Circuit, China Film Stellar Film Chain, Liaoning North Cinema Circuit, Sichuan Pacific Cinema Circuit and China Film Digital Cinema. These circuits connect the whole country from north to south, east to west. They form an integrated, centralized network much like multiplex

chains in the United States and Europe. Once again, this state-led arrangement provides leverage in the coordination of release patterns to better position preferred pictures.

In restructuring the film industry, the state decided to lower its support to major studios known for their production strength. Most resources saved were then re-allocated to CFG instead. According to Yin Hong's report, in 2004 CFG produced 35 features, 110 TV films and invested in 52 films (Yin and Wang 2005: 20), becoming the country's dominant film producer. This is clear in its involvement in *dapian,* blockbuster pictures imported from abroad or home grown.

Chinese *dapian* ('big pictures', blockbuster films) began with *Hero* (2002), followed by *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), *The Promise* (2005), *The Banquet* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). These domestic hits are mostly *wuxia* martial arts, historical costume pictures and boast famous stars, spectacle and high technology. Together these domestic films earned an enormous box office share over the past six years. In 2004, the top ten Chinese movies outperformed imports for the first time (Yin and Wang 2005: 24; Melvin 2006). There were 212 films produced, 50 per cent higher than in 2003. Domestic films did even better in 2005, with 60 per cent of box office share, then slipped to 55 per cent in 2006 (Yeung 2007). Films produced in the mainland grew from 260 (2005) to 330 (2006), to over 400 in 2007, and it is important to the industry and the state that Chinese films take over half of domestic revenues.

All of these films were released by or jointly released with the China Film Group. However, the ingredients of such *dapian* were not sufficient to sustain a picture programme beyond the initial spurt and they did not satisfy expectations of a diversified market. The Communist Party's criticism of *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Coonan 2007) prompted CFG to initiate change in making *dapian* of different genres, within the content and ideological requirements of the party (Zhang 2007). In 2007–2008, there were co-productions of a well-known Qing era story *The Warlords* (remaking a 1973 Shaw Brothers picture *Blood Brothers*); a Stephen Chow comedy, *CJ7*; John Woo's first mainland Chinese picture, the historical battle epic *Red Cliff*; and finally a biopic on the opera star *Mei Lanfang*, directed by Chen Kaige. These films are all distributed through CFG and released in peak seasons such as summer and Lunar New Year holidays. They are films calculated to entertain as many and as grandly as possible, pulling out all stops in spectacle, budgets and marketing campaigns. These are the films that tempt comparisons with Hollywood, and they are clear examples of 'market economy with Chinese characteristics' (see Tables 2 and 3).

In addition to blockbusters, *zhuxuanlü*, 'main melody' film is CFG's other exclusive business. These mainstays of state-run studios are well-crafted didactic tracts such as *A Servant of the People* (dir. Zheng Dongtian, 2004), *Dingjun Mountain* (dir. An Zhanjun, 2005) and *Zhang Side* (dir. Yin Li, 2004). Rather than *dapian* blockbusters with propaganda asides, these films are frankly evangelical, aiming to glorify socialist heroes and bolster nationalist sentiment (Ward 2007). Historical incidents and Communist hagiographies are well represented, as are patriotic war stories. As texts they are intriguing not only for their political forthrightness but with such

Year	Number of Films Produced
1995	146
1996	110
1997	85
1998	82
1999	99
2000	83
2001	71
2002	100
2003	140
2004	212
2005	260
2006	330
2007	402

Table 2: China's annual feature film production (1995–2007).

Sources: China Film Yearbook *(1995–2006) and* China Film Market *(Jan. 2007)*

longstanding industrial presence, main melody films have an almost 'classical' integration of story, style and ideology. Recent example *The Knot* (dir. Yin Li, 2006) unites melodrama subplots from both Taiwan and Tibet that powerfully fantasize the sublime, all-embracing One China principle. CFG is in charge of production and distribution of these main melody films. Many are released in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's (SAR) commercial circuits, indicating the marketing clout of the distributor.

Prod Yr	Title	(In USD)
2002	*Hero*	29,227,053
2004	*House of Flying Daggers*	18,550,725
2004	*Kung Fu Hustle*	20,291,436
2005	*Seven Swords*	10,246,914
2005	*The Myth*	9,270,705
2005	*The Promise*	22,304,833
2006	*The Banquet*	17,902,813
2006	*Curse of the Golden Flower*	37,500,000

Table 3: Domestic box office of Chinese blockbusters.

Sources: China Film Yearbook *(2002–2006), Box Office Mojo*

Co-production: CFG's regional and global alliances

Another monopoly enjoyed by China Film Group Corporation is co-production, i.e. cooperation between China and foreign countries. This is done through CFG's subsidiary, China Film Co-production Corporation (CFCC). Established in 1979, CFCC was authorized by the government to administer, coordinate and promote co-production in China. Under official mandate CFCC established film trade relations with several countries and regions, through co-production treaties, logistical assistance and administrative supervision in location shooting. CFCC not only serves as the exclusive agent for co-production, it also acts as watchdog, censoring scripts and screening applications, and assigning suitable domestic studios for line production.

CFCC's role has become more important in film marketization. First, with the WTO entry, China has actively pitched its location/cost advantages to foreign projects and in return, expects to raise its international profile, seeking technical know-how and creating employment for domestic film workers. Recent examples include *The Painted Veil* (Warner Bros, 2006), *The White Countess* (Merchant Ivory, 2006) and animated feature *The Magic Gourd* (Disney, 2007). All these co-production projects were handled by CFCC, ensuring the state's paramount control, ranging from SARFT approvals, commercial registration, tax matters and even the Public Security Bureau's involvement, especially if film shoots involve police or crime stories.

Another key source that helped enhance CFG's market share is co-productions with Hong Kong SAR, China's Special Administrative Region. Responding to Hong Kong calls for greater access to a booming market, the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) was implemented in January 2004. With proper CEPA clearance, Hong Kong companies are allowed to do business in the mainland via joint venture with a Chinese partner. Under CEPA, Hong Kong movies may count as domestic Chinese releases, thus exempt from the annual quota of foreign films allowed into China and not subject to a box office cap of 13 per cent, as prescribed for foreign films by CFG. They also get tax concessions: only 10 per cent on revenue instead of 20 for foreign businesses (Liu 2006). On the surface, CEPA's major beneficiary is Hong Kong film, but in practice, China also gained from closer partnership with its post-97 special administrative region. From 2004 to 2007 one hundred films qualified for CEPA status. Some of these CEPA pictures are in fact international co-productions between Hong Kong and other countries, such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the United States (*Fearless, A World Without Thieves, Love of May, Battle of Wits, The Warlords, CJ7*, et al.).

For instance, Beijing director Feng Xiaogang was hired to make a CEPA film for Media Asia/Columbia Pictures-Asia/Huayi Brothers, *A World Without Thieves* (Hong Kong/US/China co-production, 2004). It boasted the biggest cross-straits talent including Taiwan's Rene Liu, with Hong Kong star Andy Lau Tak-wah and Ge You, a mainland regular in Feng's postsocialist comedies. This film also had Chen Kuo-fu, Taiwan director, as executive producer working for Beijing-based Columbia-Asia, a Hollywood outpost. Regarding co-productions and market-oriented changes, Feng said, 'Don't push the reforms too fast. Taking it one step at a time is better

than taking one big step and then being pushed back ten steps. There are always reform critics who are looking for loopholes to attack. It's best to let it happen slowly but surely' (Chung 2004). For Wong Kar-wai's *2046*, France and Germany were partners because of Hong Kong-based Fortissimo's European financing. CEPA works therefore as a platform between China and the rest of the world—facilitating global cooperation, alliance and greater market access for products from both sides. Thus the policy promotes investment and expertise from dispersed sources, and boosted production levels overall.

But there are costs as well as benefits. CEPA requires content adjustments, attending to film censorship and avoiding subjects that might not appeal to mainland audiences. These adjustments vary depending on the pictures and producers. In other words, to secure market entry, CEPA films must satisfy state censorship and acquire mainland partnership; to gain market share, they must have a mainland connection in terms of content. In this regard, film marketization in China is not just economic program, but a political fiat. Here we find a distinction between 'marketization' proper and marketization-as-policy. The former carefully tailors commodities like feature films to local consumer tastes while marketization-as-policy lists the rules by which commodities may count as local, made-in-China products. These rules stipulate that foreign businesses join Chinese partners so that products fulfill regulations profiting those partners, not necessarily the minority stakeholder, nor the market itself. In fact, this second, special sense of marketization policy actually protects the market against economic redistribution through competition, because selected Chinese partners must be attached for the project to find its way to market at all.

Here is an example. The third installment of the hit Hong Kong trilogy *Infernal Affairs* (Media Asia, 2003) was a Hong Kong-China co-production just prior to CEPA but forecast the policy's intent. With the casting of popular mainland actor Chen Daoming, the undercover police thriller introduced a new cross-border story element. Also added: a didactic resolution at odds with the trilogy's ambiguous moral subtext. The film was then premiered at the December National People's Congress in Beijing even before it opened in Hong Kong. These additions dismayed Hong Kong audiences, but benefited Media Asia and CFG because mainland profits of *Infernal Affairs III* soared, overcompensating for its poor result in Hong Kong (Davis and Yeh 2008: 29–37).

CEPA promotes a more porous relation between the People's Republic of China and regional film industries, especially its newly repatriated territory the Hong Kong SAR. This new China-Hong Kong engagement reorients the relation between cinema and nation. While enthusiasm for CEPA ran high, as seen in Hong Kong service providers' exuberance, there were concerns with cultural identity. Producers, stars, and multiplex builders are thrilled if their wares find success in a market that dwarfs Hong Kong. But those who would maintain some distinctiveness in Hong Kong film culture are worried, lest its local appeal vanish in the march to sell northward (To 2007). Granted, the rise of Hong Kong cinema since the 1960s shows that a distinct local cinema may be transnational, serving multiple markets with diverse languages and requirements. Hong Kong cinema has admirably performed that multilateral role despite its

local vernacular and topics. Furthermore, Hong Kong's ambiguous relations with the nation and access to transnational capital greatly enhanced its cinema's market flexibility. In the twenty-first century, with China's ascent to the global economy and the regional market's insatiable demand for big budget, high concept commodities, Hong Kong cinema has changed again, though parts may yet revert to the sidelines, as in the 1950s and 1960s. Under CEPA Hong Kong cinema may function to showcase Mandarin-language films that are China-bound. Hong Kong the transnational has been driven by China's market power to re-define itself as part of a great nation on the rise. Employing Hong Kong expertise, these Big Pictures carry unmistakable messages, glorifying China as super-sized extravaganzas designed to awe. Here, we find the vigorous re-nationalization of once transnational cinema. With Hong Kong's participation, the united national cinema is hyper-nationalized and thus transnational becomes transitional.

Conclusion: a hyper-national cinema?

China's market potential helped create Chinese blockbuster films, *dapian*, that seemed to counter and pre-empt Hollywood imports, but it brings problems of creative and distribution monopolies. In theory, marketization of culture industries promotes a wider forum for exchange of ideas, and desire for economic, social and cultural freedom. Marketization is supposed to foster internationalization, which brings into the nation-state abundant new ways of rethinking modern China's needs. At its best marketization allows commerce to flow unhindered and helps set-up of international businesses. International enterprise brings in global networks and standards that make the world smaller, yet facilitate a greater range of products, innovation and ideas (Ravich 2000). Marketization has already delivered economic growth, prosperity, and new patterns of production and consumption in China. It also promises a great deal for a socialist, one-party system: a spectacular economic surge, rising incomes and standards of living, and a premium of consumer choices, as well as diversifying the means of marketing cultural products, information and lifestyles.

Yet any alignment with Chinese co-productions must accede to censorship and the management of China's distribution system, which remains regulated and controlled. Chinese marketization has adopted the blockbuster functions of high budget tent-pole spectaculars, but it also cleaves to a quite narrow range of subjects and styles. Reasons for this are both economic and political. *Dapian* are entertainment pictures, with astounding attractions and booming consumerism; and they sell stories and ideas inclined strongly toward national glorification, as prescribed by CFG in order to find entry into the marketplace. In itself this is unremarkable, but when such films are inevitably successful, the market speaks: it is made to say 'serve the people', as the Communist motto goes. In this way hyper-nationalist *dapian* and the market are a mutually reinforcing circle. In her book Zhu Ying perceptively writes,

> It is the odd combination of the postsocialist Chinese state's laissez-faire economic policy and its unrelenting political/ideological dictatorship that

> worships, simultaneously, a market freed of concerns for cultural values and a politics devoid of democracy and free expression that has impoverished Chinese cinema, resulting in the film industry's economic pragmatism and political cynicism which trumpets cinema's commercial value over all else.
>
> (Zhu 2003: 154)

Of the Chinese state Zhu uses 'worship' to suggest profligate idolatry, with golden calf banquets of feasting and consumerist abandon. The will of the market, it seems, at odds with expectations of freedom of expression. Clearly 'the postsocialist state' is incompatible: it cannot serve two masters. Yet calling the combination 'odd', contradictory or oxymoronic assumes a slippage between 'free' market and 'free' country, and this is a logic repellent to the administration. Instead, its avowed intent aims to buttress state power through market and market mechanisms, ensuring that 'marketization' is a means to predetermined ends. These ends are clear on the surface and in the depths of contemporary Chinese epics, on screens, stage and global athletic display.

In mid-September 2007 CFG's chief, Han Sanping, announced the group's determination to be listed on the Chinese stock market (Frater 2007b). It remains to be seen if this ambition will be realized soon. CFG's intent of attracting more private money, more influence, and growing even bigger reveals a hyper-national state cinema in the making.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was made possible by a grant awarded by Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, Project Number RG015-P-05. Emilie Yeh thanks the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for its generous support.

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Suggested citation

Yeh, E. and Davis, D. W. (2008), 'Re-nationalizing China's film industry: case study on the China Film Group and film marketization', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2: 1, pp. 37–51, doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.37/1

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Journal of Chinese Cinemas Volume 2 Number 1 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.53/1

Transnation/transmedia/transtext: border-crossing from screen to stage in Greater China

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Abstract

This essay attempts to reconceptualize transnational Chinese cinema along transmedial and transtextual lines by examining two collaborative stage projects devised by major film-makers and theatre practitioners from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the People's Republic of China under the aegis of Hong Kong art collective Zuni Icosahedron. The multimedia performances Journey to the East '97 *and* Experimental Shakespeare: King Lear *exemplify a trend in Chinese transnationalism which transgresses and transcends not only regional and geopolitical borders but also textual, linguistic and disciplinary ones. The essay further investigates the ways in which transmedial frictions and interactions are exploited in these productions to articulate chronotopic dichotomies of presence/absence and appearance/disappearance in relation to Hong Kong's fate and inter-Chinese political developments after 1997.*

Keywords

Transnational Chinese cinema
Chinese experimental theatre
transmediality
transtextuality
Zuni Icosahedron
Hong Kong

In recent years the field of Chinese film studies has consistently embraced a description of Chinese-language cinema(s) as a plural entity shaped by transnational patterns of production and reception, and marked by a multiplicity of identities and discourses. This approach has contributed to overcoming the limitations of the 'national cinema' model and unravelling the complexities of national, ethnic, and gender (self-)representation as articulated within and across the borders of Greater China. The transborder quality of transnational cinema, however, cannot be grasped merely in geopolitical/economic terms. Contemporary filmic discourse is increasingly defined by hybrid gestures of generative contamination across genres, texts, and technologies that blur the boundaries between cinema and other media. Accordingly, transnational cinema requires an equally dialogic analytical mode that helps unearth its hybrid connections and reassess its value along transmedial and transtextual lines.

This essay contributes to such reconceptualization by examining two stage projects devised by Chinese film-makers and theatre directors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China under the aegis of Hong Kong-based artistic collective Zuni Icosahedron. *Journey to the East '97* and *Experimental Shakespeare: King Lear* constitute instances of territorial/geopolitical transnationalism, as they forge connections

between artists from the 'three Chinas', and epitomize a typology of transmedial/transtextual articulation in which the borders between the cinematic and dramatic, visual and physical, are constantly crossed over.

Transnation

Current conceptualizations of Chinese transnational cinema largely concentrate on regional parameters and investigate connections among 'competing national/local "Chinese cinemas"' (Lu 1997: 3), along with the financial factors affecting the productive, distributive, and consumptive patterns of a globalizing Chinese film industry. Recently, Sheldon Lu (2005: 223–24) has attempted to establish a topology of transnational film-making by outlining three broad categories of commercial-global, independent art-house, and exilic transnational cinema. This classification is nonetheless still prevalently related to production/consumption patterns and geopolitical criteria, whereas 'relations across disciplines, media, and technologies' (Zhang 2007: 30) have also played a pivotal role in forging Chinese cinema's transcultural visuality. Undoubtedly, the heterogeneity and multifocality of current Chinese film praxis demand more versatile analytical strategies, and a more complex investigation of its interdisciplinary potential.

Transnational cinema is often seen as a result of globalization and the growing interaction of people, investments, and technologies. It is nonetheless worth noting that the 'transnational' is not merely the manifestation of a homogenizing machinery that erases difference and engenders global-Hollywood sameness, nor is it tantamount to vague and often superficial notions of 'multinational' and 'cosmopolitan'. The transnational engages in a synergetic dialectic of homogeneity and specificity which comprises both the recognition of global forces and the preservation of *intra*national experiences and 'contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition, and resistance' (Wilson & Dissanayake 1996: 1). The potential of transnational cinema or any transborder praxis to resist homogenization and intervene in hegemonic discourses becomes apparent if we picture – as Michal Kobialka does – the border as 'a wound', a fracture, an interstitial locus of both compliance and resistance (Harding 2006: 25).

The generative potential of the transnational is effectively encapsulated in the semantics of hybridity that the projects detailed below communicate – hybrid identities, languages, media/texts; their impetus towards adaptation, cross-fertilization, and 'glocalization' testifies to yet another expression of Chinese cinema's transnational aesthetics. As Yingjin Zhang would put it, they capture the multiple simultaneous directions of contemporary Chinese film studies: 'outwards (transnationalism, globalization), inwards (cultural traditions and aesthetic conventions), backwards (history and memory), and sideways (cross-medial practices and interdisciplinary research)' (2007: 29–30). The embrace of 'transversal' methodologies aimed at transcending territorial and disciplinary boundaries, moreover, may help deconstruct the predominance of Eurocentric and East-West binaristic approaches in current scholarship on China(s). This is what Zuni artistic director Danny Yung endorses when he highlights the 'cross-field exchange focus' and inter-Chinese participation of *Journey '97*, defining it as an attempt to formulate alternative critical dimensions so that

'the dividing line between East and West can be discerned, accommodated, and perhaps eventually erased' (1997: 6–7).

Another element to consider when assessing the ontology of the transnational is the enduring significance of the national. As Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden argue, 'one of the central aspects of transnationalism as a critical discourse is its dialectical engagement with – rather than simple rejection of – ideas of the national' (2006: 13). The transnational both transcends and presupposes the national. Likewise, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar highlight the persistent vitality of the national in the configuration of the Chinese transnational and the effectiveness of probing their mutual interactions. Yet whereas they point to the necessity of determining 'what the "national" in the word *transnational* [original emphasis] means' (2006: 5), my purpose is rather to investigate the multiple implications that the 'trans' in the transnational may entail.

The prefix 'trans' denotes processes across, beyond, and through borders. To 'trans' means to transfer, transcend, trespass, transgress. Yet the parameters of such activities are not only physical, nor are the borders merely those of the nation-state. In contemporary art and media production the act of 'trans-ing' has come to encompass a multiplicity of chronotopic and figurative movements concerning not merely geopolitical processes and financial flows, but also transcultural encounters, transtextual intersections, and transmedial connections. Projects like *Journey* and *Lear* – defined as they are by practices of transmutation across, beyond, and through the borders of stage and screen, texts and technologies – help us highlight the potential of media-crossing to communicate the frictions, disjunctures, and diverse connotations of border-crossing, and elucidate the multiple ways in which the transnational can be construed.

Albeit primarily a performance group, Zuni has always entertained intense relationships with other creative industries such as cinema, video, and architecture, and has long been a supporter of transnational dialogues and media cross-fertilizations. There seems to be a recurring pattern in their exploration of the transnational; namely, a trend towards trans-media and trans-textual hybridization. While engaging with the basic 'territorial' meaning of the transnational by promoting trans-regional collaborations, they also frequently engage with border-crossing acts relating to the media/texts involved in their production.

Zuni's work largely consists of abstract meditations on space, time, and the body. Their aesthetic focuses on discontinuity, non-organicity, and layering of multimedia effects which demystify the fundamentals of theatrical creation – theatre-as-drama, theatre-as-language, theatre-as-(holy)text. Zuni emphasizes dynamism, visuality, and sound, cherishing the architectural, kinetic, and 'cinematic' qualities of the stage. Such deconstructive impetus may be ascribed to a sense of 'in-betweenness' stemming from Hong Kong's torn identity as an interstice between China and Britain (Lilley 1997: 127) and, since 1997, as a 'wound' between her colonial past and current status as a 'special zone' of the People's Republic of China. Hong Kong constitutes Zuni's creative factory, inspirational muse, and thematic core of many projects – almost a *raison d'être*. Zuni and Hong Kong nurture and mirror one another in their role as liminal yet crucial forces and '*in-between* [original emphasis] spaces of negotiated language,

borderland being, and bicultural ambivalence' (Wilson & Dissanayake 1996: 2).

Thus in several of Zuni's transnational projects the 'trans' comes as well to evoke metaphoric passages across the intangible borders of history and time, the interstitial spaces of memory, and the fissures between private and public narratives, present uncertainties and future visions. Specifically, the temporal border and emotional 'wound' of 1997 prompted Zuni to gather artists from different regions and disciplines to reflect on the shifts in geopolitical balances and 'structures of feeling' within the inter-China area during Hong Kong's late-transitional phase, and produce aesthetic responses to a transnational condition pregnant with meaning.

Transmedia – *Journey to the East '97*

The performance series *Journey to the East* has brought together over the years artists as diverse as Tsai Ming-liang, Edward Yang, Stanley Kwan, Ong Keng Sen and Eric Khoo. The concept of *Journey '97* emerged in anticipation of Hong Kong's ultimate chrono-historical boundary – her return to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Theatre directors Danny Yung, Edward Lam,[1] Li Guoxiu, Lin Zhaohua and Li Liuyi, film-makers Edward Yang and Stanley Kwan, and several visual artists and scholars from the three regions joined forces to create a collective space of transmedial visuality in which to prefigure the transformations in national identities and transnational relations following the handover.[2] *Journey* aimed at establishing 'a new and unique public sphere' in which equal and pluralistic dialogue would arise in 'the absence of historical burden' and beyond 'slogans and formalities' (Yung 1997: 6). All pieces addressed questions of national identity while exploring behavioural/spatial/temporal interactions as indicated in the title – Journey/East/1997 – and dichotomies of static/active, self/other, individual/institution. As J. J. Shih observes, the notion of 'China' – hence of 'nation' – evokes various associations: is it a group of people, a kind of identification, a cultural atmosphere, a value system? *Journey* proved that it 'is not and cannot be a stagnant concept' (1997: 16).

Each director was required to produce a thirty-minute piece for two performers employing a standard Chinese opera set – one table and two chairs. This cheekily alluded to the 'one country, two systems' formula proposed by Beijing as a post-1997 governance policy for Hong Kong. The metaphoric and polysemantic use of the table and chairs – variously appearing as multifunctional props, personified objects/characters, and political signifiers – also hinted at the potential for transnational/transmedial re-positioning offered by this project, as well as the historical juncture in which it was conceived.

To film-makers such as Yang and Kwan, *Journey* provided an opportunity to probe new areas and expand the 'lens' through which one views film and theatre by looking 'toward the interweaving of influence and differentiation between the two media' (Knopf 2005: 2).[3] For Chinese-language cinema, their involvement epitomized a symbolic revisiting of its theatrical/operatic roots – a retro-journey from the 'electric shadows' back to the 'shadow play'. In such instances as Yang's *Brother Nine and Old Seven: A '97 Fantasy*, albeit expanding on leitmotifs of the film-maker's oeuvre

1. Lam is a Zuni founding member and an established dancer and choreographer. He wrote the screenplays for Stanley Kwan's *Red Rose, White Rose* (1994) and *Yang + Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (1996).

2. *Journey* was part of the First International Conference on Urban Culture held in January 1997 which comprised art exhibitions, critical seminars, cultural policy forums and a performance programme. The latter was re-run in June at the 9th London International Festival of Theatre.

3. *Journey* marked Kwan's stage debut, whereas Yang had previously directed plays such as *If* (1992) and *The Season of Growth* (1993).

thematically, formally this work seems to discard the cinematic lens almost completely to focus more on metatheatrical techniques, the metaphoric implications of the opera set, and 'pure' dramatic effects. Conversely, mixed-media pieces such as Kwan's *Work* and Li Guoxiu's *In the Name of Lee Teng-hui…Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust* exhibit attempt to 'cinematify' the theatre (Meyerhold 2005: 22) and generate complex synaesthetic experiences. One of *Journey*'s goals was in fact to recognize the theatrical space as 'a passage' through which to disclose transversal dimensions of transmedial experimentation and redefine 'the boundary of the stage' (Yung 1997: 7). Yung's ambition to 'expand or shrink' the stage parameters, moreover, touched upon the sense of uncertainty concerning Hong Kong's fate after 1997 – budding civil society and catalyst of transnational exchange or imploding space of disappearance?

Ackbar Abbas (1997: 7) describes Hong Kong as a space 'whose appearance is posited on the imminence of its disappearance', and pervaded by a sense of *déjà disparu*; namely, the feeling that what appears as new and present is always bordering on absence, if not already vanished. The interplay of presence/absence – or appearance/disappearance – and the notion of *déjà disparu* are fundamental to understanding *Journey*, as they help us define its inherent qualities and the specificities of the different media engaged in its production; or, put differently, the frictions engendered by the transmedial interaction of film/video and live performance within the works. The presence/absence dichotomy informs the project thematically, as a meditation on post-1997 inter-Chinese relations; in terms of *mise-en-scène*, through figurative treatment of the mandatory table-and-chairs décor; and formally, as it is employed to investigate the peculiarities of film and theatre and their distinct engagements with concepts of space, time, and duration.

As Robert Knopf (2005: 6) writes, 'if there is an inherent quality of theatre … it is the fact that theatre performance, by virtue of its "live-ness", disappears as soon as it is spoken', whereas 'film performance … is kept "alive" in a way that theatre performance … cannot be'. Theatre is defined by transience, or by what we may call the ontology of the *déjà disparu*. Film makes absence perpetually present, whereas theatre is present only in the specific time and space in which it 'lives'. Film produces an impression of duration; it preserves time. Theatre is impermanent; it consumes time and is itself consumed by/in it. It is thus intriguing that a project primarily conceived to investigate a temporal border (1997) and fix the transient reality of a 'vanishing' space (Hong Kong) chooses theatre – a 'slippery' form par excellence – as its privileged medium. Yet in both *Journey* and *Lear* the producers seem to counter this inherent paradox through film; namely, by incorporating video segments and cinematic techniques into live performance so that the final products merge the 'solidity' of the physical presence of the actor onstage (Bazin 2005: 110) with that engendered by the cinema's ability to record and preserve reality. Transmediality thus becomes a means to confront the discourse of disappearance.

Kwan's *Work*, a collage of theatre and film, is significant in this respect. Kwan placed his actors behind a screen among graphics and images, while his first-person narration accompanied the performance-cum-screening. Kwan confronted 1997 through personal recollections and scenes of

Hong Kong daily life, thus evoking collective memories and feelings of longing and loss by way of autobiography and micro-history.[4] *Work* defies the anxiety of obliteration through intimate family accounts and remembrances of the iconic spaces of Kwan's adolescence – the movie theatre and the lavatory – physically evoked onstage by the mandatory table and chairs. Movies, opera shows, and bathhouses played a key role in his personal and professional trajectory and feature prominently in such films as *Centre Stage* (1991), *Hold You Tight* (1998), and the documentaries he produced in the same period as *Work – Yang +Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (1996) and *Still Love You After All These* (1997). One might actually see *Work* as a preparatory piece for – or appendix to – those documentaries on account of abundant analogies in content and formal approach such as tropes of homosexuality and cross-dressing, autobiographic accounts of family life and quotidian activities, associations of individual and national identity, politics and sexuality, motherhood and motherland, and extensive 'employment of mirrors, glass, and reflections' (Berry 2005: 449).

Tropes of nostalgia for the past and melancholic meditations upon the future are characteristic of Kwan's oeuvre, as testified by such atmospheric accounts of Hong Kong's history as *Rouge* (1987) and *Red Rose, White Rose* (1994). Indeed, *Work* evokes a comparable sense of *déjà disparu* to that detected by Abbas in Kwan's cinema and Wong Kar-wai's. Kwan's awareness of the territory's slippery chronoscopes and engagement with the discourse of disappearance are consciously made apparent by the way in which he exploits the tensions between the two media. As his voice-over engages in a reflection on time through a transtextual homage to Wong Kar-wai, film-strips cross the screen and the image of a clock – yet another signifier of time – is projected onto a chair. Kwan praises Wong's handling of cinematic time while the performers quote lines from *Days of Being Wild* (1991):

> Yuk: Time's up. What do you want to say?
> Wing: What's the date today?
> Yuk: The 16th.
> Wing: 1960, April 16th, 2:59 pm. You and I were together. Because of you, I will remember this minute. From now on, we are 'One Minute Friends'.
>
> (in Yung 1997: 33)

A table hangs before the screen, as if suspended in time and space. Projected onto its surface are jumbled images and lights whose swift criss-crossed motions suggest the movement of 'a blackboard duster, rubbing out … Hong Kong's collective memory' (Shih 1997: 18).

On the one hand, Kwan's transmedial techniques and meta-cinematic devices reveal an impulse at preservation; *Work* seems to employ cinema as 'a time machine' which preserves the past and 'present[s] intact vanished or ruined environments' (Sontag 2005: 145). Yet, on the other hand, one of *Work*'s chief cinematic symbols – the suspended table functioning as projection screen – evokes acts of erasure, obliteration, and signifiers of an impermanent, chaotic condition. As Susan Sontag would put it, Kwan employs film within live theatre as both 'document' and 'hallucinant' (2005: 148). The apparent frictions in the interaction of the two

4. Kwan edited a number of video images including faces in a crowded underground and scenes from his mother's life.

media and in their engagement with presence/absence and temporality actually reflect the tensions and disjunctures of the real historical time in which the work itself was produced. Ultimately, and somewhat paradoxically, theatre becomes in this context an ideal medium to reflect on disappearance, since it is made of the same vanishing matter and 'elapsing time' as the realities surveyed in *Journey* were in 1997.

Journey fleshes out the presence/absence dichotomy and the discourse of disappearance also through figurative layout of the opera set, as in Li's, Yung's, and Yang's contributions. This is at times 'cinematified' – when table and chairs are employed as screens for videos and slides – or 'personified' – when they act as signifiers of political circumstances or 'perform' figuratively as animate characters in their own right. In Li's segment, Chinese and Taiwanese flags are spread onto the table as a spinning chair hangs in mid-air – signifying Taiwan's uncertain identity. Slide-projections accompany the performers' violent interactions, and two monitors relay footage of former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's speeches interspersed with noises of dripping water. Comparable strategies occur in Yung's *This Is a Chair*, a satirical monologue supported by slides in which an actor made up as former Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa speaks as he sits on a brightly-lit chair placed at the centre of the stage – possibly symbolizing the Mainland. Another chair – signifying Hong Kong – only appears sporadically, in the dark, behind a towering table and screen, as if alluding to unbalances in inter-Chinese relations following 1997.

The piece voiced the dilemma of a territory 'that had spent years searching for a "position", an identity that would accommodate its transition from British to Chinese rule', and yet 'finding a position in the post-1997 era would be secondary' to upholding the boundaries of one's freedom and beliefs (MacKenzie & Arthurs 2003: 77). Indeed, the boundaries set by London and Beijing were made known on that very occasion. Several Mainland participants including visual artist Wang Jianwei, director Lin Zhaohua and film-maker Wu Wenguang – who was cast to perform in Lin's *Three O'clock in the Afternoon* – were denied their visas to Hong Kong.[5] Wang completed his installation *in absentia* by faxing instructions to colleagues on-site, and Yung devised his unsurprisingly caustic *pièce de résistance* as a last-minute replacement for Lin's.[6] Li Liuyi's *Table and Chairs without Story* remained the sole Mainland presence in the bill, although the absences – once more – were greatly significant. This incident surely proved the enduring 'presence' of the 'nation' within the Greater Chinese Transnation that *Journey* wished to establish, and possibly made some wonder whether this democratic creative forum was actually an attainable reality or just a utopian Pan-Chinese dream.

Yang's play, too, explores tropes of appearance/disappearance and inter-Chinese allegories as it stages a confrontation occurring in Hong Kong between a shady Taiwanese official (Brother Nine) and a killer (Old Seven). The text reflects upon the moral bankruptcy engendered by Taiwan's 'economic miracle' by exposing a decadent underworld of gangsters and conniving politicians. Yang dips into leitmotifs of his cinema such as disquieting visions of urban violence, alienation, and satires of social hypocrisy and institutional corruption as featured in *Terrorizers* (1986), *A Confucian Confusion* (1994), and *Mahjong* (1996). 'All of us are

5. Best known as a documentarian, Wu Wenguang has also occasionally worked as a stage actor, for instance in Mou Sen's *File Zero* (1994) and Lin Zhaohua's *Three Sisters Waiting for Godot* (1998).

6. 'Strained' UK/PRC relations were for Yung (1997: 70) the reason for this incident.

murderers' – Old Seven states – 'and our country is one big gang' (in Yung 1997: 66). Prophecies of post-1997 Hong Kong–Taiwan relations and anxieties about the overbearing presence of the Mainland over both are evoked by verbal references to an absent yet evidently crucial 'Big Brother', and again visually through the arrangement of the 'tripartite' set. A hitherto hidden chair appears in the end: for Shih 'it serves as an altar' (1997: 17) for a top-secret briefcase alluding to underhand transactions among the three regions; for Lin Kehuan it personifies an 'invisible master' (1997: 112) who has been there all along – or will soon be. Hence in all performances the spinning or hidden chair – namely, the 'third' unstable element, or missing piece, in the delicate triangular construction that is Greater China – serves to evoke tropes of presence/absence, and conditions of uncertainty and (Confucian) confusion.

Transtext – *Experimental Shakespeare: King Lear*

Meditations on uncertainty and Greater Chinese confusion also inform the post-handover collaboration *Experimental Shakespeare: King Lear* (2000) – a collage of four adaptations of the Bard's tragedy conceived by Danny Yung, Edward Yang, Meng Jinghui, and Stan Lai. *Lear* transcends the boundaries of a single medium and bears traces of theatrical 'cinematification' not only because major film-makers and media artists were involved in its production but also, and especially, since video-sequences and cinematic techniques of montage, non-synchronicity, and elliptical narration constitute essential elements of its aesthetics. Moreover, the project's transmediality and transnationality were further enhanced by the producers' highly generative engagement with processes of transtextual plundering, pollution, and pastiche.

Adaptation is frequently regarded as a site of cultural politics and ideological reinscription; specifically, in a postcolonial context such as that of Hong Kong, the parodic defacement of an English classic – a quintessential symbol of colonial history – for local and trans-local purposes spells out a declaration of cultural independence. Likewise, its trans-generic and translingual qualities – the production merges English, Mandarin and Cantonese – construct *Lear* as a 'carnivalizing' gesture of counterhegemonic resistance against Hong Kong's new 'king' – the People's Republic of China.

Each director was commissioned to create a thirty-minute piece for three actors opened by a three-minute film. Each was required to use a video-projector, a slide-projector, minimal props, and investigate connections between Shakespeare and the socio-historical developments of the three 'Chinas'. The playbill (Zuni 2000) nicely underscores *Lear*'s 'panoptical' focus by presenting a four-eyed Bard caricature on its cover. The programme also features 'Web Lear' and 'Film Lear' sections providing information about the project's sources, including classic screen renditions such as those by Brook, Godard, and Kurosawa. Yung planned to design a videogame version of *Lear* and Yang – who was then developing his web-based animation project Miluku – proposed to extend the performance into virtual theatre and establish a website to generate audience feedback.

The four-eyed Shakespeare picture points as well to the project's marked visuality. The Shakespearean text seems to mistrust words and

writing, and assume that only what one sees and does is genuine; hence the exploration of form, movement, and audio-visual effects plays a much greater role here than faithful textual rendition. For Yung, *Lear* was 'only an excuse to generate a forum' (Zuni 2000) – a neutral territory in which to exchange ideas. Yet in terms of politics it was actually not that neutral, as the directors invested Shakespeare's characters with different connotations according to their different socio-historical backgrounds. The conflicts ensuing between Lear and his daughters – the flattering but treacherous Goneril and Regan and the honest Cordelia – and the play's central theme – that of the tripartite division of a kingdom – were taken again as allegories of inter-Chinese power balances.

Yung probed the boundaries between virtual and real and expanded previous experiments with video as a primary light source onstage, thereby producing 'architectural' effects and an enhanced sense of dynamism. His piece begins with a video of a giant sun and clouds, as a slide is projected onto the screen – 'There is nothing/I want to say'. This statement, which encapsulates Cordelia's response to Lear's desire to appreciate the intensity of his daughters' affection, recurs in various forms (slides, dialogue) and languages (English, Mandarin, Cantonese) throughout the performance, eventually becoming 'I want to say/There is nothing'. As Cordelia is signified at first solely by a projection rather than a physical presence onstage, so Lear's appearance is signalled by purely aural means. The Bee Gees' 'How Deep Is Your Love' is employed as soundtrack to the video-prologue, thus ingeniously condensing two of the play's pivotal scenes – the division and the storm – into a three-minute image-cum-soundscape.

The performers enact the tragedy in minimalist and abstract fashion, yet the message is crystal clear. A despotic Father – the King and by extension the Chinese Communist Party rule – questions the loyalty of his daughter – Hong Kong. This simple metaphor is nonetheless complicated since Lear speaks Cantonese and Cordelia Mandarin. Occasionally the performers swap roles, hence signification. The woman sings Beijing Opera – another quintessential signifier for the Mainland – but the man's Cantonese speech gradually prevails over her singing, thereby suggesting Hong Kong's determination to maintain an independent voice over Beijing. Eventually, audio-visual stratagems prevail once more over text and speech. A haunting cacophony of 'hallucinant' sounds and lights, frantic movements, and spectral shadows shuffle onto the screen, effectively visualizing the turmoil caused by Lear's insanity. Goneril's 'I love you more than words can wield the matter' – one of the tragedy's most emblematic lines – fades in, while Lear's fatal fixation is again evoked aurally and made present by the voice of Teresa Teng singing: 'You ask me how deep my love is'.[7]

The film segment introducing Meng's *A Hundred-Thousand Questions of Why* shows the gigantic face of a lecturing teacher. Meng adopts the same gender inversion as that seen in Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), and turns the daughters into sons. His version focuses too on issues of allegiance to a Godot-like father figure – the Nation/Party/State – that never appears physically but manifests its presence through numberless and increasingly meaningless questions projected onto a screen. The tragicomic absurdism

7. Lyrics from 'The Moon Represents My Heart'.

and abundant animal imagery characterizing this piece are not only typical Meng-style trademarks as seen in his film *Chicken Poets* (2001) and the drama *Rhinoceros in Love* (1999), but also point directly to key Shakespearian motifs. Meng downplays the patently political passages of *Lear* while drawing abundantly on the Fool's absurd patter and the nonsensical articulations of Edgar/Poor Tom.

The sons are questioned about their backgrounds in a manner resembling a school examination or a police interrogation. They talk fondly of their (absent) fathers as they perform synchronous gestures which are concurrently announced by slides – 'washing hands'; 'washing face'; 'washing head'; 'washing brain'. Eventually the sons/pupils/defendants smash their coats against their desks in a sudden thrust of violence, which articulates their resistance against fathers, institutions, and authority at large. Their frantic silhouettes grow enormous behind the screen, bathed in eye-piercing light. A bell rings, and one final question fades in: 'Why don't you turn and look back?'

Whereas Meng seems to call for a reconsideration of the past, Yang's *Century 21* reflects on global postmodern conditions and millennial anxieties about the future. His video prologue features blurred shots from a train journey, while a male voice-over talks about Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and Shakespeare. Three bubbly teenagers – Lear's daughters – dance and sing disco tunes about love and life in the twenty-first century. Their performance is concurrently filmed and projected onto the back-screen, cross-cut with footage of crowds at pop concerts. Goneril's famous speech ('I love you more than words can wield the matter') also fades into the filmic image. Yang thus constructs *Lear* as a synchronous screen-and-stage montage in which the two media superimpose and echo one another. Towards the end, as Cordelia recounts childhood memories, a long video sequence relays footage of CNN shows, Japanese cartoons, popular movies, political speeches, computer images, and sports events.

Yang engages here in an existential meditation which is both extremely intimate and emblematic of a sense of universal angst. There is much of his private and cinematic world in this *Lear*. The opening train sequence reflects Hong Kong's figurative 'journey' from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China, but also mirrors Yang's own relocations from the Mainland to Taiwan, and later the United States. The teenage sisters incarnate his interest in female subjectivities and coming-of-age narratives as exhibited in *That Day, on the Beach* (1983), *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), and *Yi Yi* (2000), and the adoption of the musical genre and global-pop aesthetics recapture his experiences of growing up with Japanese and American culture.

The sparkling optimism for a globalized postmodern future eventually gives way to sombre meditations on past horrors and present fears. Visions of Hiroshima, the Holocaust, executions, and famines parade onto the screen whilst a lonesome Cordelia wonders, as she enters the twenty-first century: 'What am I, now? I don't know'.

Stan Lai closes the collage with a contemplative piece merging excerpts from *Lear* and the Buddhist text *The Thirty-Seven-Fold Practice of a Bodhisattva*. In the video prologue, footage of surging waves accompanies projections of passages from the scripture, which are subsequently recited

in Mandarin and synchronously relayed in a pre-recorded English voice-over:

> In one's native land
> Waves of attachment to friends and kin surge,
> Hatred for enemies rages like fire,
> The darkness of stupidity prevails,
> Oblivious of right and wrong.
> To abandon his native land
> Is the practice of a Bodhisattva.
>
> (Lai 2000a: 3)

Lai builds *Lear* upon a 'logic of contradictions' (Huang 2006: 7) which juxtaposes abstract scenes centred on physical and aural effects – he intended to explore 'the memory of sound' (Lai 2000b: 5) through polyphony, onomatopoeias, and simultaneous speech – and dramatic scenes re-enacting key Shakespearian passages such as the division, the storm, and Gloucester's blinding. A further level of juxtaposition lies in the alternation of composed moods – the Buddhist recitation, the actors playing violin and simulating blowing winds – and brutal outbursts – Lear's hallucinations, Gloucester's despair, Nature's fury.

Yet the most captivating factor, especially in view of the aforementioned presence/absence dichotomy, is Lai's treatment of Cordelia. A dark bundle revealing 'long female hair' (Lai 2000a: 2) lies onstage. This is Cordelia's corpse, which is later buried in a pool of snow-white sand. Hence Cordelia does not die at the end of the play as she does in Shakespeare, but is absent throughout. Accordingly, in the ensuing scene in which Lear tests his daughters' affection, her role and lines are expunged too. Lai constructs the division scene as a cinematic flashback in which the events leading to the kingdom's destruction and Cordelia's demise are expounded in retrospect. Most interestingly, if one surveys the Bodhisattva practices as listed in the Buddhist scripture and the virtues that Shakespeare ascribes to Cordelia there seems to be a manifest equivalence between the two. Both have renounced 'wealth and possessions', 'friends and benefactors', and 'the ocean of Samsara' (Lai 2000a: 3–4); both are absent physically, yet present by way of audio-visual cues.

The two texts mirror one another thematically whilst resonating with poignant references to Taiwan's shifting perceptions of the 'native land' – China. Visions of the Mainland as at once a realm of memory and longing – the home of 'friends and kin' – and a traumatic foreign Other also pervade Lai's celebrated play *Secret Love for Peach Blossom Spring* (1986), adapted for the screen as *The Peach Blossom Land* (1992). Although *Lear* was conceived in times of unease, 'with a presidential election going on in Taiwan and the question of succession confronting Taiwan's residents', Lai claimed that he never envisioned it as primarily a political play (Huang 2006: 8). He rather was intrigued by its 'relentless refusal to provide the possibility of healing' (Lai 2000b: 4) to humanity's myriad diseases.

Still, the recurring references to the Bodhisattva's separation from 'unfavourable places' and 'close friends', and Lai's chosen Shakespearian scenes such as the confrontation between Gloucester and Edgar – namely,

another blind father (literally this time) who unjustly banishes his offspring – evoke yet again tropes of forced exile and nostalgia for the 'other shore'. Furthermore, his understanding of a drama centred on territorial division as a meditation on the impossibility of healing aptly encapsulates the image of the border as a 'wound' – physical and emotional – outlined above. As Alexander Huang argues, Lai ultimately stages here 'the triangulation of the personal, the national, and the transnational' (2006: 22).

This remark neatly applies to the entire *Lear* experiment as well as *Journey '97*. Both reveal the extent to which the 'personal' – autobiography, memory, self-reflexivity – and the 'national' – politics, identity, language – affect one another and still play a role in current articulations of the Greater Chinese transnational. Indeed, in certain contexts nationalism operates as 'a canny dialogical partner whose voice often seems to be growing stronger at the very moment that its substance is fading away' (Ezra & Rowden 2006: 4). The profusion of national allegories and iconographies of presence/absence, disappearance, and misrecognition surfacing in these *fin-de-siècle* transnational projects is thus hardly surprising. Yet above all, while still resonating with national anxieties and personal concerns, the transmedial/transtextual hybridity of such collaborations underscores a discernible tendency in contemporary Chinese media praxis to articulate the transnational as a synchronous transgression of multiple borders – borders which are no longer purely physical, and no longer pure.

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Suggested citation

Ferrari, R. (2008), 'Transnation/transmedia/transtext: border-crossing from screen to stage in Greater China', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2: 1, pp. 53–65, doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.53/1

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ISSN 1750-3280

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ISSN 1750–3280 / Three issues
Print & full electronic access

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Journal of Chinese Cinemas Volume 2 Number 1 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.67/1

Filmic imaginations of the Malaysian Chinese: '*Mahua* cinema' as a transnational Chinese cinema

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Abstract

This essay locates the Chinese films of Malaysia within contexts ranging from the national to the transnational. First, it attempts to position the films of Chinese Malaysian film-makers alongside Malaysian national cinema as well as the Mahua *(Malaysian Chinese) literature that developed in Malaysia over the last one century or so. Second, the paper de-territorializes the Chinese films of Malaysia as transnational and transcultural entities. It further examines Malaysian Chinese films as a 'new' transnational Chinese cinema developed in connection with other transnational cinemas in the contemporary cosmopolitan world. It asks how this cinema is 'transnational' and if it bears some specific meaning of 'Chinese-ness' as it develops in today's globalizing Malaysia.*

Keywords

Chineseness
Malaysian cinema
digital film
identity

Introduction

For most of 2007, a research grant enabled me to stay in Kuala Lumpur studying contemporary Malaysian films. Most of these films were digital shorts made by young, aspiring 'Chinese' film-makers, in which the characters communicate in Chinese languages and sometimes in English. While watching a collection of Malaysian short films titled *2005 Beautiful Malaysia Shorts*, I ran across *Beautiful Malaysia*, a twelve minute film by Zun Yap.

The film is set in a meeting room of a prison. A journalist and a photographer, both Chinese women, encounter a convicted drug dealer before he is to be hanged. We hear that the convict, a Chinese Malaysian, was once a police officer (a rare feat for a Chinese, as most state jobs are offered to Malay Malaysians as a result of a constitutional 'policy'). However, he resigned from the police, got connected with the drug racket, and was caught by police. The journalist asks him if he feels remorse for the harm he did to 'innocent' people. He says he does not feel any guilt or sorrow, and quite ironically asks the journalist if she can enable him to feel regret. Then they take a break. When the interview starts again after the break, the man sitting on his chair seems quite relaxed and asks the journalist to continue. However, the journalist neither poses a question, nor sits. Instead, she places her tape-recorder on the table and starts it. We hear 'Negaraku', the Malaysian national anthem. We gather that the journalist recorded it during the break. Hearing the anthem, at first the convict

becomes perplexed. Then he slowly stands up to show the customary respect to the national anthem. Does he feel regret now? We cannot be sure. The film ends here.

Within its short span, this minimalist short film shot in an ordinary room with only a few chairs and a table made me aware of the complexities inherent in independent film-making practices, nationhood and Chinese identity in contemporary Malaysia. A short digital film by a Chinese Malaysian film-maker, it can be taken as an example of the new wave of Malaysian independent cinema. Such 'Chinese' films portraying characters using Chinese languages (Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien) and English constitute the majority of Malaysian independent films in the 2000s (Khoo 2007: 228–9). They normally tell the stories of Chinese protagonists in locales of contemporary Malaysia where we rarely see a non-Chinese character. These films thus represent a Chinese environment in contemporary, multicultural Malaysia, and cinematically construct a 'Chinese Malaysia'. This paper investigates the possibility of seeing this Chinese-made, Malaysia-based film practice as a distinct cinema and explores its relationship with the national and the transnational. I examine the contexts as well as the textual and institutional aspects of this 'Chinese Malaysian cinema'. While the Chinese film-authors of Malaysia have received attention from film festivals, scholars and film critics and their films have been hailed as innovative artistic ventures, their works have rarely been discussed as a distinct cinema. This essay is therefore an early effort to situate these 'Chinese Malaysian' films, in particular in relation to transnational Chinese cinema(s).

By putting the 'Chinese' films of Malaysia in various possible contexts, this essay provides a framework in which to locate these Chinese-produced digital films, produced in recent years as part of the growth of a Malaysian–Chinese cinema. The contexts I develop for this emerging cinema are neither concrete nor complete. As Lawrence Grossberg says,

> The problem of interpreting any cultural text … must always involve constituting a context around it … but contexts are not entirely empirically available because they are not already completed, stable configurations …. They are … the site of contradictions, conflicts, and struggles …
>
> (cited in Lee 2005: 116)

Bearing this caution in mind, I locate the Chinese films of Malaysia within various incomplete and contradictory contexts ranging from the national to the transnational. These possible contexts both complement and conflict with each other. First, I position the films alongside the Malaysian national cinema and within Malaysian national borders. Here I look at the possibility of marking this cinema as a '*Mahua*' (Malaysian Chinese) cinema alongside the *Mahua* literature that developed in Malaysia over the last century or so. However, no cinema in the contemporary world can be seen as a purely national endeavour anymore. Rather, like other cultural productions, films of any nation, space or community are fundamentally transnational and transcultural entities. Therefore, my second step is to de-territorialize the Chinese films of Malaysia and locate them as a 'non-Malaysian cinema'. I examine them as a 'new' transnational Chinese cinema,

developed in connection with, and in opposition to, other transnational cinemas in the contemporary cosmopolitan world. I ask how this cinema is 'transnational' and if it bears some specific meaning of 'Chinese-ness' as it develops in a globalizing Malaysia.

Cinema, nationhood and the Chinese as 'other' in Malaysia

The Malaysian nation is very much an 'imagined community', to use Benedict Anderson's term (2006: 14). The birth of this nation did not pass through bloody, populist and anti-colonial struggles. Rather, it was imagined in an elitist manner. Malaysia was born in 1957 with no bloodshed, through only negotiations between the British and the Western-educated leaders of the major races of West Malaysia in the early to mid 1950s amidst the threat of Communist insurgency. This pre-planned – if not painless – and engineered birth of 'Malaysia' that mainly took place in meetings in London,[1] together with the multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-religious mosaic of the Malaysian population, clearly position Malaysia as an 'artificial construct' (Spivak 1990: 39). The 1998 population estimate is 57 per cent Malay/*Bumiputera* (lit. 'sons of the soil'), 24 per cent Chinese and 7 per cent Indian, with many sub-groups within each major racial community. While 'virtually' all Malays are Muslims, almost all Chinese and Indians are non-Muslims: Buddhists, Christians and Hindus (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 4–6). However, the government's Department of Statistics claims the 2002 breakdown is 65 per cent Malay, 26 per cent Chinese and 7.7 per cent Indian. It also claims that there are 60 per cent Muslims, 19 per cent Buddhists, 9 per cent Christians and 6 per cent Hindus (Balraj 2003: 176). Alongside this ever-shifting mosaic, the race riots of May 1969 between the Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia, and after that the state's pro-Malay policies to engineer a harmonious (read pro-Malay) nation are sufficient to merit the interpretation of Malaysia as a cultural artefact.

The race riots of May 1969, in which the Malays supposedly attacked and killed huge numbers of Chinese Malaysians, is certainly the most decisive incident that reshaped history and nationhood in postcolonial Malaysia. After the race riots, the project of nation-building took a bluntly pro-Malay turn. In 1970, the longest-running Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad said that, 'Looking back through the years … there was never true racial harmony' (Mohammad 1970: 4–5). Such an understanding, coupled with the idea of the 'genetic' backwardness of the Malays, made the state initiate the National Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 (Loo 2003: 183). The NEP extended more privileges to the Malays, ensuring that they gained better positions in business, academia and politics. However, 'it also meant that the other races were required to sacrifice' (Tope 2001: 3–4). Film-maker Amir Muhammad ridicules the outcome of the NEP in the years from the 1970s to the 1990s when he complains: 'Some political and language leaders seemed more interested in establishing solidarity with Malay South Africans rather than non-Malay Malaysians' (Muhammad 1998: 105). This pro-*Bumiputera*/Malay policy is still in place. This high level of racial separation leads the Indian-Malaysian politician Kayveas (who himself is part of the coalition in power, Barisan Nasional) to ask: 'I go to London and I am a Malaysian; I go to China and I'm a

1. When celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of independence in 2007, exhibitions and newspapers in Malaysia proudly displayed photos of London-bound Malay, Chinese and Indian leaders in airports during 1956–7.

Malaysian . . . . But why is it when I come back to Malaysia, I am an Indian?' (Khoo and Tan 2007: 34).

Such contestation among the various races – but especially between the Malays and their Other, the Chinese – certainly requires that one approach Malaysia as 'a cultural space . . . with its transgressive boundaries and its ''interruptive'' interiority' (Bhabha 1990: 5). For nations like Malaysia that combine many races and ethnic groups, the nation is very definitely a hybrid community that must not be named too easily and positively (Bhabha 1990: 291–322). Therefore, the leading Malaysian cinema scholar Gaik Cheng Khoo rightly uses Homi Bhabha's concept of 'DissemiNation' and renames this nation as 'Malay/sia' (2006a: 56–82). I would argue that the conflicts and interactions among middle class Malays and the Chinese Malaysians, as well as their search for a suitable identity (be it Malaysian, Malay-Muslim, Chinese, Chinese-Malaysian, or something else), shaped the development of a Malay-language national film industry in postcolonial Malaysia as well as a largely Chinese-language independent cinema in recent years.

Though the Malay-language cinema has been normalized as Malaysian national cinema over the years (Khoo 2006a: 102–3), this cinema is a hybrid cultural institution. Hamzah Hussain rightly comments that the 'Malaysian film industry was founded on Chinese money, Indian imagination and Malay labour' (cited in Van Der Heide 2002: 105). However, the hybridity of the Malaysian nation and of the Malaysian cinema was never celebrated in Malaysia. For example, the role of the Chinese or Indian Malaysians in the film industry, as well as the production and dissemination of Chinese-language digital films, is never positioned as an important part of Malaysian cinema history.

Most survey histories written on and about cinema in Malaysia do not acknowledge the filmic efforts of the Chinese in Malaysia, let alone the development of a Chinese-language cinema in recent years. This 'anti-Chinese' tendency is somewhat similar to the efforts of the pro-Malay government of Malaysia since the riots of 1969. In the 1970s and 1980s the state's explicit pro-Malay policies also Malayanized the film industry. For example, the state-established FINAS (National Film Development Corporation) took steps in the 1980s to limit the business activities of Malaysian film companies (which were mostly Chinese owned) and focused on either production or exhibition.

Such state-sponsored pro-Malay policies in all sectors de-emphasized certain notions of national or cultural identity in post-1969 Malaysia, such as Chinese-Malaysian identity. So the Chinese-language digital films – the majority of independent films made in Malaysia in last few years – seemed problematic to Malay-nationalist Malaysianism, because these films cannot be accommodated within the 'national cinema' of Malaysia. Nonetheless, these films are hard to ignore, because they gained entry to, and awards in, international film festivals under the flag of 'Malaysia'.

Malaysian Chinese-Language films as *Mahua* cinema

Why have independently-produced Chinese-language digital films only become a strong current in the Malaysian mediascape in recent years? Clearly, this trend is linked with the social, technological and media

changes of the 1990s and 2000s. In the late 1990s, Malaysia entered a new phase of nation-building spearheaded by Mahathir Mohammad. This is symbolized by huge and 'ultramodern' construction projects like the Petronas Twin Towers (in 1996), the Suria Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) shopping centre (in 1998), and the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport at Sepang (in 1999). The Malaysian media was also globalized in the 1990s via the state-sponsored Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the privatization of television, and the penetration of transnational satellite television channels. While television media became increasingly commercialized in the 2000s, the MSC has been seen as an important part of Mahathir's 'Vision 2020'. Some have argued that the MSC and Vision 2020 have re-negotiated a multiracial identity for Malaysia (Saloma 2005).

Therefore the 1990s and 2000s can be seen as the period when Malaysia established itself as one of the few almost-developed Asian nations that is readying itself to embrace new technologies and new ideas. This 'wealthier Asian nation' status in an increasingly global economic playground also enabled the rise of a new art cinema discourse, which is varied and vibrant. For example, it includes a new wave of Malay art cinema that started with U-Wei Hajisaari's *Kaki Bakar* (*The Arsonist*, 1994), the first Malaysian film screened in the prestigious Cannes film festival.

This new trend of Malay-language art cinema that developed in 1990s Malaysia can be seen as a precursor to the current independent digital film movement. In this period, a new generation of Western-educated Malay(sian) film-makers like U-Wei Hajisaari, Mansur Puteh, Anuar Nor Arai and Shuahaimi Baba, produced art films tackling issues hitherto unrepresented in Malaysian cinema. These modernist Malay film-makers assumed different roles for a Malay art cinema and wanted to utilize cinema to critique the society they were in. Their films worked towards the revival of a Malay-language 'national' film industry through an art cinema discourse. A few years later, they were joined by two other film-makers – Teck Tan, a Chinese, and Yasmin Ahmad, a Malay. Tan with his *Spinning Top* (2000) and Ahmad with her *Slit-eyed* (*Sepet*, 2005), both of which deal with inter-racial love affairs between Chinese and Malay young people in contemporary Malaysia, created an opening for newer and younger voices to appear.[2]

The digital-format, self-funded and independent Malaysian cinema started to develop within the changing national conditions and global mediascape of the 1990s and 2000s. This low-budget, multi-language, and artisanal independent cinema developed in Malaysia largely because of the availability of high-resolution digital video cameras and user-friendly digital editing facilities. Amir Muhammad, a Malay-Indian writer-columnist, started the trend of Malaysian digital new wave in 2000 with his feature film, *Lips to Lips*. James Lee's two features, *Snipers* and *Ah Beng Returns* (both 2001), closely followed. Ho Yuhang, Tan Chui Mui, Woo Ming Jin, Khoo Eng Yow, Chris Chong Fui, Azhar Rudin and a host of other Chinese-Malaysian film-makers followed soon after. They have contributed a good number of Chinese-language films to Malaysian independent cinema since 2001, making up the majority in this trend. Gaik Cheng Khoo points out:

> Many Independent filmmakers are, for the first time, Malaysian Chinese, … whose representations of themselves, as well as the stories they tell –

2. The Malaysian censors asked for 25 cuts in this film. However, it won awards in Hawaii and Delhi (Muthalib & Tuck Cheong 2002).

> whether in Malay, English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, etc. – all challenge the negative ethnic stereotypes prevalent (in the Malay-language mainstream cinema).
>
> (2006a: 123)

Following the literary practice of Malaysian Chinese authors in Chinese languages, a practice that has been ongoing for some decades in Malaysia, I wish to position these Chinese-language films by Malaysian Chinese film-makers as '*Mahua*' cinema. The word *Mahua* comes from *Malaiya huaqiao*, meaning 'Malaysian Chinese'. This term has been used for Malaysian Chinese literature (*Mahua Wenxue*) since the 1930s (Kok Chung 2005: 31), but it has never been used in the case of Chinese films from Malaysia before. As I wish to locate Chinese Malaysian films as a discrete cinema culture, it can be considered on a par with *Mahua* literature. As the Chinese Malaysians in the early twentieth century believed that they were only temporary settlers in Malaya, the *Mahua* literature of that time mainly depicted mainland China. However, during the Second World War when the Japanese army occupied Malaya, Chinese Malaysians became more at home in Malaya and started a new stream of *Mahua* literature that talks more about local realities and less about nostalgia for China. Though the *Mahua* writers reflected more on their life in Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s, the National Cultural Policy adopted by the state in 1971 did not accept *Mahua* literature 'as a component of national literature, … because its medium of writing is Chinese' (Kok Chung 2005: 34). Within such an 'anti-Chinese' linguistic-cultural environment, and because of the Malay hegemony in the film industry outlined above, the Chinese Malaysians were not able to express themselves in film during the second half of the twentieth century. Only when the cheaper and higher-resolution digital video became available did the cinematic expression of the Chinese Malaysians I call '*Mahua* cinema' begin.

The *Mahua* cinema as a means of expression for the Malaysian Chinese becomes more important when we consider the strict control of the state over Malaysian media. The use of mass media as a tool to keep the status quo among various races and communities is still prevalent in Malaysia. At the 2007 Mass Media Conference in Kuala Lumpur, the current prime minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi, justified the necessity of media control laws by saying: 'When naughty children are no longer unruly, the cane should not be thrown away. Just hang it on a nail on the wall' (Manirajan 2007: 2). Within this state-controlled media environment, it is notable that most of the Chinese-language digital films produced since the early 2000s have eluded the censorship procedures of the state because they were not screened in local cinemas. So the *Mahua* cinema has quickly turned to be a newer vehicle of free expression and identity formation for Chinese Malaysians.

Mahua cinema as a transnational cinema

The *Mahua* cinema that consists of Chinese-language shorts, documentaries and feature films produced in digital video during the last seven years can be seen as a 'transnational project' (Tsing 2000, cited in Berry

and Farquhar 2006: 196) in the global world of the 2000s. This cinema as a transnational project needs to be seen in a paradoxical frame, because these films are produced and circulated at the interface of the national and the transnational. Almost all the Chinese-Malaysian film-makers who are contributing films to *Mahua* cinema represent the post-1969 generation and are very much rooted in the national conditions of Malaysia. They were born and brought up in Malaysia between the 1970s and 1990s under the NEP. They were also educated in local institutions. For example, James Lee took classes at the Actors Studio in Kuala Lumpur and worked as a karaoke waiter, restaurant cook and bookshop assistant to make ends meet. In his words, 'I was planning to go to a film school, overseas, but (I couldn't) afford it *lah*' (Fadzil 2005). Tan Chui Mui, born in the small town of Kuantan, also studied in Kuala Lumpur at the Multimedia University. Though some Chinese Malaysian film-makers went overseas for study – for example, Ho Yuhang and Chris Chong Fui – they returned, and are staying in Kuala Lumpur to make their films.

If we look at the *Mahua* films themselves, these are also interactions between the national and the transnational. In one way or the other, they deal with the nation and the national for the Chinese in Malaysia. Most *Mahua* films tell stories about interpersonal relationships, especially about betrayal and separation among Chinese protagonists in various Malaysian locales. Though these stories could take place almost anywhere, they are appropriated into the cultural and historical trajectories of a postcolonial nation-space called Malaysia. Khoo argues that one has

> to look hard to find the Malaysian identity of these films but when contextualized to the socio-economic changes in recent Malaysian history and landscape in the last 30 years, these films emerge as cosmopolitan and sometimes cosmopolitical Malaysian products.
>
> (2007: 231)

Because of such cosmopolitan characteristics, the storytelling is very transnational. These films adopt and adapt the methods and metaphors of various foreign and transnational cinemas, mainly European art cinemas and their recent, Asian, incursions. After Michelangelo Antonioni, one of the most revered European art cinema auteurs of the 1960s and 1970s died in July 2007, Malaysian film critic Hassan Muthalib exclaimed in an email that Malaysian film-makers like James Lee, Tan Chui Mui and Ho Yuhang are carrying on his tradition (2007). The more direct influence of Taiwan's and Hong Kong's new cinema auteurs, such as Tsai Ming-liang and Wong Kar-wai, can be felt when watching most *Mahua* films. While James Lee is called 'Malaysia's Tsai Ming-liang' by fellow film-maker Amir Muhammad,[3] Khoo (2007: 234) specifies the influences of Godard, Ming-liang and Kar-wai in Lee's films (in *Ah Beng Returns*, *Room to Let* and *Teatime with John*, respectively). Lee himself admitted that his 'film-worldview' changed after he watched Kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* in the mid-1990s (Fadzil 2005). Tan Chui Mui has also confessed that she is influenced by Taiwanese writers (Khoo 2007: 237 and 244).

Non-mainstream, counter-cinema film auteurs like Ming-liang and Kar-wei are longstanding favourites in film festivals, art-house venues, and more

3. Author's observation at a meeting with Tsai in Kuala Lumpur in June 2007.

recently among art cinema connoisseurs who want to own and repeatedly view DVDs of these master film-makers' works. The off-beat cinematic methods utilized in *Mahua* cinema films are also related to the exhibition of these films. Often with only an English title but no Malay or Chinese title, these films are rarely screened in Malaysian towns outside Kuala Lumpur and Penang. As of the end of 2007, there were only three e-cinemas able to screen these films in these two cities, though not all *Mahua* films get released in these venues. Lee says, 'Whether it (my film) will ever get screened locally is not a problem for me. To get your films screened in cinemas, you have a responsibility. They open cinemas for business, not for you to screw up their place. I'll just try to find some other way to screen it' (Lim 2005: 14). On another occasion, Lee said, 'When I was giving a talk [at a University], they said, "we've heard about all these indie films … but how can we get to watch them?" … I told them, it's time that the audience becomes more proactive and looks for us instead' (Fadzil 2005). On both occasions Lee seems to admit that his (and other *Mahua*) films are more visible in 'proactive' transnational distribution circuits than inside Malaysia. These Chinese-language 'Malaysian' films equipped with English subtitles are mostly targeted at international film festivals, rather than local cinemas. Almost all the digital films by the Chinese Malaysian film-makers have been shown in various international film festivals in Asia (including Hong Kong, Singapore, Pusan, Bangkok, Delhi and Tokyo), Europe (including Rotterdam, Karlovy Vary, Oberhausen, Fribourg, Nantes, Vesoul, Dauville and Torino), and North America (including Seattle, New York Asian, Montreal World, Toronto and Vancouver) over the last few years. Some of the films have also received major awards. For example, the Tiger award at Rotterdam this year and in 2007 went to two *Mahua* films in a row: Chui Mui's *Love Conquers All* (2007) and Liew Sang Tat's *Flower in the Pocket* (2008). Chris Chong Fui's *Kolam* (*The Pool*) received an award at Toronto in 2007.

In other words, *Mahua* films address a transnational audience. Khoo has identified this audience for Malaysian independent cinema as a global civil society sharing a sense of humanism in a cosmopolitan context (2007: 232–33). However, global audiences armed with a general notion of humanism but unaware of the particular conditions of Malaysia may not always comprehend a *Mahua* film. For example, Lee said that the critics at Torino international film festival interpreted *The Beautiful Washing Machine* 'as how capitalist, consumerist culture contributes to the breakdown and dysfunction of Asian families. That was not my intention at all …' (Lim 2005: 14). The ability of non-Malaysian and non-Asian audiences to make meaning out of such a film at the same time as they misunderstand its Malaysian Chinese particularities demonstrates the global functions of *Mahua* cinema. This strengthens my view that this cinema, being produced in the pseudo-democratic, developmentalist and multiracial but ethnocentric national conditions of Malaysia, but circulated in the global world for consumption by a cosmopolitan civil society, functions as a transnational public sphere. These films, produced at the margin of national film industry and circulated mostly outside national borders to a non-Malaysian audience, address the global citizens of today's world as if they create a shared communicative space for both their Malaysian producers and transnational consumers.

Mahua cinema as an 'inauthentic' Chinese cinema: imagining China and the Chineseness of Malaysia

In this last section of the essay, I locate the Chineseness of *Mahua* cinema. Can these recent filmic ventures be seen as a new Chinese cinema? How should we locate the Chineseness of these films? If these Chinese Malaysian films can be seen as another emerging transnational Chinese cinema, how does it negotiate Chineseness?

The Chineseness of the Malaysian Chinese and in turn the representation of China and the Chinese in the recent Chinese-language films of Malaysia are ambiguous, to say the least. This ambiguity is palpable on various counts. First, the Chinese migrants who came to Malaya, a predominantly non-Chinese or 'even anti-Chinese part of the world' (Clammer 2002: 142) in the nineteenth century were not a homogeneous group. Rather they came from various parts of China, and brought in their different dialects and occupational skills (the Hokkiens, the merchants; the Teochews, the agriculturalists; the Cantonese and the Hakkas, the artisans; and the Hainanese, the domestic servants). John Clammer locates dialects as the binding force among the Chinese of diverse origins in Malaya:

> [D]ialect and place of origin emerged as the two possible foci of social organization amongst [Chinese] migrants of very diverse origins … because of the very functional reason that most migrants … could only communicate with those who spoke the same dialect.
>
> (2002: 143)

Therefore, the community we are readily referring to as the Malaysian Chinese is highly segmented, and such an umbrella term may be quite misleading.

Second, the idea of Chineseness is always ambivalent, and in most cases geographic location (mainland China) and language (Mandarin) have been utilized to clarify such ambivalence. Therefore, the Chineseness of the Malaysian Chinese becomes more questionable. Rey Chow notes how Mandarin has been normalized as the standard 'Chinese' language, and points out that, 'those who are ethnically Chinese but who, for historical reasons, have become linguistically distant or dispossessed are, without exception, deemed inauthentic and lacking' (1998: 11–12). In this way, the Chinese migrants and their descendants who were born in Malaya or Malaysia and have lived there for generations can readily be grouped as 'inauthentic' Chinese. Such an 'inauthentic' Chinese author, Huang Jingshu recalls his experience in mainland China:

> Born in a place other than the land of my ancestors, I am a *Huaqiao* (overseas Chinese); I was labelled as an overseas student when studying at the university; as a foreigner when applying for a visa; as an illegal worker when working; and as the first batch of 'fujian' immigrants applying for citizenship ….
>
> (cited in Kok Chung 2005: 46)

In other words, the Chinese film-makers of Malaysia would never be treated as *proper* Chinese just because of their distant links with mainland China and the Mandarin language. However, these impure Chinese citizens

in Malaysia have been and are always treated as the 'Chinese' in Malaysia. Chow notes that in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, the 'inauthentic' Chinese are discriminated against 'by not being allowed to *forget* that they are Chinese' (1998: 12; emphasis in the original). Ien Ang, herself a Chinese from Indonesia, calls such treatment 'the dominant culture's classificatory practice, operating as a territorializing power highly effective at marginalizing the other' (1998: 224).

Being caught in such an ironic circumstance, as described by Chow and Ang, the Chinese Malaysian film-makers do not want to call themselves Chinese or mark their films as Chinese films, let alone to put their films alongside other transnational Chinese cinemas. Khoo correctly points out that 'they would prefer to be known for their contribution to the medium of film and visual story-telling rather than be representative of their ethnic minority group' (2007: 231). For example, Lee, an 'inauthentic' Chinese film-maker – he was born in Ipoh in Malaysia and his mother tongue is Cantonese, not Mandarin – is one of the leaders of the independent cinema of Malaysia, and he vehemently opposes the idea of calling himself a Chinese film-maker. When he was asked if he is 'advancing the cinematic voice of the Chinese in Malaysia', he said, 'No, I'm not comfortable with that perception.... I don't think it's my job to portray Malaysia or the Chinese' (Lim 2005: 14).

However, in the same interview, Lee admits his Chineseness and its influence on his film-making:

> Yes, (my films) can happen anywhere with Chinese people. It's not deliberate.... When I work with Chinese actors, I can communicate with them clearly what I want.... My last three films were in Chinese because it's what's easiest for me to do.... I see things a lot in a Chinese way. I can't escape my upbringing. My parents didn't study overseas, I didn't study overseas so it's a very local [Malaysian] Chinese way of seeing things.
>
> (Lim 2005: 14)

When I interviewed another Chinese Malaysian film-maker, Chris Chong Chan Fui, he also voiced a similar opinion: 'Malaysian Chinese film-makers portray the 'Chinese' world because that is what they know about and know well' (Raju 2007).

Therefore, I would argue that the Chinese-Malaysian film-makers are making filmic imaginations of China through transnational *Mahua* cinema films. Arjun Appadurai pointed out back in 1990: 'The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order' (1990: 5). Therefore director Ang Lee, when asked about his construction of 'China' in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, commented easily that 'the China he envisioned was a fantasy China of his boyhood dreams' (Chan 2003: 59). In the same vein, the Chinese Malaysian film-makers have become a part of 'some of the "Chinas" that are making movies as collective agency other than the nation-state' (Berry 1998: 147).

Drawing on Kim Soyoung's concept of 'geo-political fantasy' (2007), I argue that the Chinese Malaysian film-makers create a geopolitical fantasy on screen. The de-territorialized imagined community that they display through their films is a version of China, a utopian China that exists no

more or possibly never existed. Though they may not admit this explicitly, by looking at their films more closely, I find that this imagined geopolitical space may be marked as 'Chinese Malaysia'. In the words of Ang:

> Being Chinese outside China cannot possibly mean the same thing as inside. It varies from place to place, molded by the local circumstances in different parts of the world where people of Chinese ancestry have settled and constructed new ways of living.
>
> (1998: 205)

Therefore, *Mahua* cinema needs to be seen as a part of new ways of living for the Malaysian Chinese in the early 2000s. This counter-discourse can be located against the Malayanization of film and screen media, as well as of strict state control of media in contemporary Malaysia. This cinema makes visible the Other(s) of the Malaysian nation. These are instances of how the Chinese, as the Other of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia, encountered and responded to a monolithic Malayanized notion of Malaysian national identity. These films are posing the obvious question: what is Malaysia as a nation and who are the Malaysians? Going against the homogeneous notion of Malayness and Malaysianness as advocated by the state since the early 1970s, these films demonstrate racial multiplicities within Malaysian identity. In this way, *Mahua* cinema as a hybrid and Chinese cinema in contemporary Malaysia is imagining a 'Chinese' Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

The research for this essay was made possible with the ASIA fellowship offered by the Asian Scholarship Foundation, Bangkok and a research grant received from the Foundation for Urban and Regional Studies (FURS), University of Essex, UK.

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Suggested citation

Raju, Z. H. (2008), 'Filmic imaginations of the Malaysian Chinese: '*Mahua* cinema' as a transnational Chinese cinema', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2: 1, pp. 67–79, doi: 10.1386/jcc.2.1.67/1

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